

ELECTRIC LAUGHTER

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Electric Laughter

CHAPTER 1 - *Jackie O Incognito Clothes*

The moment had tattooed itself on Joe's psyche with its fierce needles twisting into his brain. A two-second imprint that never left his consciousness. Instead of fading over time, the memory with its colors and sensations became more vibrant. It had power over him and could invade any moment without warning. In an instant, Joe could be back at that drafty loft that he shared with Graham during the days when they were the same person, at least in his public life, in his persona. They were such dead ringers for one another that the other one had to put on prosthetic facial disguises for fear of being mistaken for the real Joe Coyote. Joe remembered the smell of his coffee as he sat on the cushy stool at the kitchen island facing away from the living room. He was reading the New York Times Travel section and dreaming up imaginary vacations that he and Angelica would someday take if they lived in an alternate universe. The St. Patrick's Day parade was muted on the television behind him, so oversized that it took up nearly the entire brick wall, a present from Graham. Joe saw the gunshot in his peripheral vision reflected in the shiny glass cabinet door in the kitchen. He turned around as the nightmare unfolded.

With cameras pointed at Graham-as-Joe riding in an open convertible like President Kennedy did in Dallas, a sniper had picked him off from one of the high rises as they turned the corner from State Street to Wacker Drive in Chicago. The bullet pierced Graham between the eyes. He collapsed. Flanked by body guards, they covered his face and whisked him off to their private ambulance that waited nearby. It had been a last minute switch. Joe was supposed to be in the cold, clammy St. Patrick's Day parade, but Graham offered to take the ride instead. The instant replay in his mind sent the same shock wave through his body even five years later. The

trauma of witnessing his best friend's murder, knowing it was intended for him stayed fresh in his mind, too fresh for him to function in the outside world.

Joe shook off the memory after a while and found himself back in this living room on the third floor of his Lincoln Park brownstone. He knew something was about to happen tonight, but time no longer had a linear sense of design, it ricocheted forward and backward. The only reason Joe had decided not to exit this strange game where his memory snapped against him like a too-tight rubber band and collided with present moment was the hope of seeing Angelica again. In a mere four hours, he would be at her concert and see her again after all these years apart when she, and the rest of the world, believed that he was dead.

Joe flipped a switch on a remote control and brought the shimmery image of Angelica Johnson to life in the corner of his living room at the bay window overlooking the park. The hologram of Angelica she played with precision and passion, her every stroke across the sinews of her cello calmed Joe's nerves. He turned up the volume on the stereo, which intensified the hologram of Angelica, saturating his senses with sight and sound. Angelica's holographic body leaned slightly forward as the music crescendoed, her strong arms in command of more than just the bow. She was fearless in her playing, taking every note to the edge, as if she was about to fall of a cliff into an abyss, but still, she kept her balance.

When the music softened again, Angelica leaned back into the Queen Anne armchair, her cello nestled between her knees like a lover. The afternoon sun angled in from outside and bathed her in a luminescent shade of gold. Even though she was an illusion, her figure filled the room with so much beauty and so much brightness that she lit up the room like the sun itself. The sight

of her took the edge off of Joe's loneliness. It quelled his anxiety, but only for a moment. The rest of the time, his intense longing hung in the air with every note.

The irony of his situation was never lost on him. For the man who had invented the cure for sadness, he was undoubtedly mired in the sludge of his own misery since he went into isolation five years ago. Joe knew he needed this stifling cocoon in order to survive, but to what end? This was no kind of life for anyone, even for a recluse like himself. He wished his life would mimic the way she played, passionate and full of wonder and surprise, with each note, each moment truly alive.

Her shimmery black hair swayed with the music as she looked up at him with those aqua blue eyes that reverberated with inner depth, even in her transparent state. Joe felt her looking at him, or through him, the way a lover does with an outpouring of love and an intimate understanding. Joe convinced himself that this wasn't a mere projection of his imagination, but that Angelica still loved him, even after all that they had been through. Her music and her movements lulled him into that dreamlike state of semi-relaxation, a consciousness just below the surface of his graveled anxiety, which stretched out across almost his every waking moment of his life.

In the early days of his exile, Joe used to try to relax with an elaborate protocol of self-hypnosis, aromatherapy, medicinal herbal teas, and triggering images, which were usually of Angelica playing her cello. Joe even made several alterations to his own electric laughter device so he could synapse himself into a calmer state. He knew so much about the brain, yet so little about the heart. The brain was like a web of neurological roads that could be redirected and rewired for desired results. He studied the brain with the hope of finding a way to quell the

aching in his heart, but his yearning for a meaningful emotional connection remained steadfast no matter how much he triggered various synapses with that imperceptible and perfectly timed jolt of electricity that emitted from the watch like device on his wrist.

Years ago when he was first catapulted into this isolation, he understood that the lack of human contact would become too much for him. It would be too much for anyone not to touch or be touched, not to love or be loved. He went to great lengths to disguise himself, sometimes dressing like a woman or an old man so he could go to the pound to play with the forgotten dogs, just so he'd have some tactile contact. Dogs would never recognize him as the billionaire, Joe Coyote, but some of them seemed to remember him from visit to visit.

Joe figured out early on how to zap himself into a temporary trance with a staccato series of electric laughter jolts, which soothed him during those days when the isolation threatened to devour him. He couldn't afford to slip into one of his trances today and purposefully pulled himself out of it before her got lost there for hours. He didn't want to miss the one day he had been waiting for, a day he would gladly have sacrificed the rest of his days just to see her again.

Joe lit up a cigarette and took an exaggerated puff. He hated smoking, but the nicotine and horrific smell were the two elements that could bring him back to the present moment quickly. Coffee wound him up too much and over-stimulated his brain. All that jitteriness wasn't a good look. He took a second puff without inhaling and let the smoke swirl around Angelica's hologram as she played the Bach concerto, his favorite, the same concerto she was scheduled to play with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in just a few hours. The smoke gave her hologram an extra dimension, as if a smokey ghost filled in the light particles that were still saturated with the sun. *We're all just energy anyway*, Joe mused.

After a few more puffs, the stagnant smoke overpowered the holographic image and made her look like more too much like a ghost and not like her lively, holographic self. Joe quickly put out the cigarette and cranked open the window. The fresh air and the sounds of the kids playing soccer in the park across the street wafted in like a prayer. As the gray cloud in Angelica's image receded, she glanced up at him one more time and gave Joe that look of hers, almost coy, kind of shy. Her beauty was timeless and transcendent. That look made him melt every time he saw it and he had seen it thousands of times during his shipwrecked years of solitude.

The music ended and her image disappeared in a heartbreaking instant. It always felt like the death of a precious moment, even though the moment was just a projection of his genius and his imagination. Joe stood just back from the window and watched the kids across the street playing soccer. His favorite redheaded kid dribbled the ball down the field and scored another goal. Joe cheered to himself. Joe had watched this kid grow up from a sand-eating five-year old to a lanky ten-year old. This kid was fast, fearless, and relentless in his pursuit. Joe loved him deeply even though they'd never met. Red was his signpost, the physical manifestation that life evolved and time had passed.

Joe flipped on another song with his remote. Mick Jagger sprang to life with visible vigor in the middle of his living room. "I can't get no, satisfaction..." Mick flipped the sweat off his brow as he pranced around Joe's living room in the tight circumference the holographic projections would allow.

Joe quickly turned him off because Mick always got him too riled up. Bruce would tire him out too, and Miles and Louis had a way of sinking him so far into melancholy that he could

get lost there for days. Joe wanted to be loose and relaxed, yet energetic and alert for today's concert. He wanted to feel in control so he could open up his heart. He hadn't been in a crowd or braved the chaos that multiplied outside these walls for so long. With Angelica's concert only a few hours away, Joe was determined to keep his focus.

He needed to get dressed, but had been obsessing over what to wear and who to be for three months, ever since he got the tickets in the mail. He owned only one device, his laptop. He used the Internet from the grade school across the street and kept a bandaid over the camera at all times. He was too afraid to get another cell phone. They were too traceable.

Joe was determined to get to her concert on time, not too early, and not too late. Since inventing electric laughter, time became a problem for him. For everyone, really since the synapse in the brain that triggered laughter often rerouted the brain's sense of time. *What was time anyway, but an illusion, a construct?*

Joe shut everything down and went downstairs to the second floor bathroom and turned on the steam and the rainforest shower. As the steam poured out, Joe flipped on the projector and another Angelica hologram came to life inside his shower. This one wasn't playing music. She looked much better in steam than she did in smoke. The mist gave her a healthy and erotic dimension.

Joe stepped into the shower and breathed in the moist air and let the mist open up the tightness in his chest. He knew he was always two steps from crazy, but he didn't care. Joe reached for the soap and broke through Angelica's hologram, causing a sharp white light to shoot out from her neck. He jerked his hand back and his elbow knocked a can of shaving cream onto the cold tile floor and triggered the sound of a gunshot.

The shock still felt fresh, even after all these years. There really was no cure for this level of PTSD, even though his Electric Laughter device was known to help returning soldiers and victims of torture recover from their psychological wounds. Joe understood that the assassination was meant for him. It was his turn to be in public, not Graham's.

Joe had been hiding out at their loft, while Graham had been living at the Lake Shore Drive penthouse, the one where the general public believed he lived. Their elaborate game of sharing his identity culminated with Joe witnessing his own murder, or what the world thought was his murder and seeing his best friend blown apart. The guilt he carried with him was enormous, like walking around inside one of those old fashioned two-hundred pound diver's suits from the forties, hermetically sealed and paralyzed from the weight.

Joe was still immobilized from the shock of witnessing Graham's murder when his phone rang moments after the assassination on the private 'burn' phone that only her and Graham knew about. Joe hesitated, then answered it. Graham's pre-recorded voice sprang out with an eerie, forceful quality. The urgency in his voice brought Joe to his senses.

"Joe, DON'T HANG UP! I know you said you were never going to speak to me again, but this is a recorded message, so we're technically not speaking. Listen to me carefully. If you do everything I tell you to, you can save your own life." Graham's voice sounded like his original voice, not like the one he trained himself to use when he was pretending to be Joe.

"This message will not be saved and you won't hear it again. Wherever you are, put on the quickest disguise that you can find and leave immediately. Take NOTHING with you, not your cell phone, not your computer, not your wallet, nothing and go to that house that we looked

at last spring. You know the one. Go there now and do not speak to anyone at all. The world thinks you're dead. If you want to stay alive, you need to keep it that way.”

Joe couldn't move. A cold wave paralyzed his body. He just stared at the phone as Graham's voice kept talking to him, as if he knew what Joe would be thinking, feeling.

“Joe, you can do this. Don't speak with anyone, especially Sturgis. ***You're dead.*** Remember that. And remember that you'll always be my best friend and my brother. You have to move, NOW. Go, Joe Go!”

The phone went dead. Joe panicked. He grabbed a prosthetic nose and glasses, threw on his cubs jacket and baseball cap. He grabbed his wallet, keys, and his cell phone out of habit. The television droned on in the background with the flashing news that Joe Coyote was shot in the head at the parade and was being rushed to the hospital.

Joe turned off the TV, took all the cash out of his wallet, and left everything on the front hall table, his watch, his keys, his computer, his phone, and his life. He looked around one last time, then slammed the door behind him.

The shower turned ice cold, jolting Joe back to his present reality. Joe stepped out of the shower and tried to shake off the memory as he dried himself vigorously with an oversized towel. *Go, Joe Go!* It was a mantra that was forever emblazoned in his psyche and the last time he heard Graham's real voice.

Joe stared at himself in the mirror as he shaved his bald head and the scraggly sections of his cheeks and neck. He scrutinized the gray splotches in his beard, which were becoming more pronounced with each passing year. He heard Graham's voice in his head, then switched to Angelica's cello music, which he unraveled perfectly in his brain, as if from an internal stereo.

In his bedroom on top of his bureau sat his Electric Laughter watch, the one he designed for himself after he customized Angelica's Electric Laughter watch. He gave himself a little zap of Electric Laughter, which took only an instant for the microchip on the back of the device to compute his bodily functions — his heartbeat, brainwaves, metabolic rate, blood pressure, bladder capacity, and various other calculations. Once the numbers lined up like a winning slot machine, an imperceptible jolt of electricity sailed through his body to his brain where it triggered the synapse that stimulated laughter. Even though the laughter was artificially induced, it was quick and gratifying like a sneeze or a fart.

His particular Electric Laughter device had a 'chaser' that zapped him with another imperceptible jolt of electricity immediately after, which triggered a synapse for calm, which in turn could lead him down a path of courage or confidence, if he didn't overdo it and melt into a trance. The aftermath of laughter depended on what he needed most at the time, as if his brain could switch the direction of the electricity like a train being re-routed down a track. The electrically induced laughter gave way to enough courage to finally face his closet. He flung open the doors and confronted his clothes, his costumes, and his past.

On one side of the closet hung the 'Jackie-O Incognito' clothes, as he referred to them, which he used for those rare moments when he absolutely had to go out into the world and couldn't risk being recognized. The dresses hung lifelessly just above his head, taunting him like former lovers or those seventh grade girls who used to tease him about being brainy and fatherless. The top shelf of his closet was stocked with wigs, fake breasts, hats, and expensive shoes in his gargantuan size. His dressing table looked like the makeup counter at a department

store where he bought most of his female impersonation wares online and were sent to his post office box.

Before Graham's murder, both he and Graham had been well trained in the art of prosthetic makeup. Graham's surgery had transformed his face into an identical version of Joe's so he no longer needed the makeup to become Joe. Then they both needed disguises to become someone else other than Joe so they move about more freely in the world. The burden of being Joe Coyote with the relentless media hawking him and their constant surveillance of his every move became soul crushing and brought him to the brink of sanity too many times. That's when Graham stepped in and lived on that craggy edge of too much fame so Joe wouldn't have to do it alone.

They figured out early how to seamlessly share Joe's public life, but moving about in the world on their own became infinitely more complicated. They learned how to reinvent their features, altering a nose or a chin or a hairline quickly and efficiently. Changing their facial features gave them each the freedom to move about in the world as someone else. Before the murder, it felt like a game and they often tried to out do one another with wild getups and complete transformation of their faces. Now it was a matter of survival.

Joe's best disguise was to change genders, but he was always unhappy with the way he looked when he was disguised as a woman. He expected to look like his mother, the beautiful Grace Coyote who had an inner and outer elegance that beamed from her smile and punctuated her every move. Joe inherited her beautiful blue eyes and her full, luscious lips, but his nose was too bulbous and his eyebrows were too menacing to give him the kind of beauty he hoped for

when he looked in the mirror. Even with gobs of makeup, eyebrow plucking, moisturizing, facial masking, toning, and waxing he still looked like a female cartoon version of himself.

Joe didn't totally mind the art of transforming himself into a woman. There was something sensual and soothing about it, the scented face creams and the gentle stroking of the brushes against his face. It was almost like a human caress.

On the other side of his closet hung the designer suits and the tuxedos from the days when Joe was at the pinnacle of his fame and fortune. The duality wasn't lost on him. He was never drop-dead gorgeous as a man either, though he could more easily convince himself that he was reasonably attractive. Maybe it was just his big stack of money that made him irresistible to women. He never knew for sure what women saw in him until he met Angelica.

Joe rifled through the men's clothes, which were gorgeous and classy and surprisingly too big. These clothes were from a lifetime ago when he worked out rigorously and dined at the best of restaurants. It had been five years since he tried them on and even he was startled at the change as he slipped on an Armani tuxedo jacket. He wore only a towel around his waist, which didn't help the look. The shoulders were too big and made him look like a scared turtle peeking out from an oversized shell. He tried to tuck in the sleeves at the wrists and pressed the button on the Electric Laughter watch inadvertently.

The laughter that escaped sounded strained and like a belch or a cough. He expelled some anxiety with that last laugh. Sometimes, Electric Laughter released ancillary, pent up emotions, which contributed to the healing powers and had been known to cure diseases and dysfunctions from cancer to depression to drug addiction, over-eating, bed-wetting, sexual dysfunction, and so on. Laughter truly was a miracle drug.

While Electric Laughter wasn't addictive per se, even Joe would sometimes binge on it. Rapid-fire jolts of laughter could imitate the feeling of being high or drunk without altering one's perceptions or brain chemistry. Instead of a hangover, Joe experienced the kind of numbly relaxed state he used to feel as a child when he'd cry himself to sleep.

Sometimes laughter saturated his brain with visceral memories and flooded him with sensations and emotions. Electric Laughter served the same purpose as wringing out a sponge. It cleared his brain from pent-up experiences. Those memories were visceral and came with their original sensations, as if they were happening all over again.

Joe caught the faint scent of a woman's perfume on the lapel of the tuxedo jacket. The unexpected laughter and the aroma poured out another memory from his past life.

It was winter and Joe was pressed against a row of fur coats in the coatroom of an upscale hotel. A saffron-colored coat brushed up against him as a buxom blonde wrapped her warm, soft skin around him. They kissed passionately.

"Two-minutes," a man's voice said from the other side of the door.

Joe tried to regain his composure, but the Blonde was insistent. Her perfume smelled like musk, or maybe it was just the scent of the sexual energy that swirled around them. Her breasts had the unmistakable feel of real breasts and her body was warm and tight in all the right places. She was magazine gorgeous and he had no idea who she was or where she came from. She started seducing him and was really good at it. He tried to pull away, but his body wasn't listening.

"It's my great honor to present to you Time Magazine's Man of the Year, the man who invented the cure for sadness, the man who everyone's talking about, and the man who just

donated a million dollars to the Children's Cancer Research Fund. Ladies and Gentlemen let's give a round of applause and a round of laughter to **Joe Coyote!**”

The Master of Ceremonies announced his name just as the breathy blonde repeated it in sensual moans in his ear. Thunderous applause erupted from the Grand Ballroom simultaneously as they orgasmed. Even his lovemaking seemed to be regaled in those days.

The coatroom door opened as the Blonde tucked her breasts back into her gown. She wiped her lipstick from his lips and giggled in a seductive, triumphant way. Joe composed himself quickly.

Flanked by his burly bodyguards, Joe walked quickly down the hallway to the Grand Ballroom. The gilded walls had a curve at the top, which reminded Joe of being inside a wave. He couldn't feel his feet on the ground. The door at the end of the hallway was open and releasing sounds that traveled toward him. The applause and the laughter got louder as he approached. Everything rose to a frenetic pace, maddening in its intensity.

Joe entered the enormous room filled with dazzling chandeliers, elegantly dressed guests, sumptuous food, and a small orchestra near the dance floor. The room swelled with Electric Laughter as the guests pressed it with the same frequency as if they were clapping for him. The energy heightened to a crescendo like some surreal symphony. The guests' faces became distorted with all that binge laughter. Joe felt dizzy as he walked up to the podium, still flanked by the guards. The scent of the Blonde's perfume lingered around him like a ghost. One of the bodyguards whispered to Joe to zip up his pants. Everyone was laughing.

Back in the closet, Joe took off the tuxedo jacket and shook off the memory. He felt ashamed at how detached he had been toward women, then felt painfully nostalgic for the feel of real breasts. He'd even settled for almost real breasts.

Joe walked out of the closet and closed the door, hoping the gesture would silence the memories or at least contain them. Then he put on his favorite 'go-to' outfit, a pair of blue jeans, a crisp, white tee shirt, and a black, cashmere v-neck sweater. He ran the insides of his palms over the soft, mink-like quality of the sweater and hugged himself. He didn't care if it was inappropriate attire for the symphony. It was all he could muster. He shut off the vanity mirror, turned out all the lights and went back downstairs.

Joe glanced at himself in the front hall mirror one last time before leaving his house. He heard Angelica's music playing softly inside his head as he checked for the Symphony tickets in his back pocket. Money. Keys. More-guts-than-brains. He was good to go. He grabbed a baseball cap and tucked himself underneath it. *Some disguise*, he thought.

CHAPTER 2 - *That Certain Something*

It was a beautiful autumn day and the scrappy soccer players in the park seemed larger than he expected them to be now that he had a new on-the-ground perspective. A strange sensation unfurled inside him, like he had just walked into the movie version of his life and was suddenly allowed to inhabit a world that he was used to only watching. The handful of times that he ventured out in over these past five years, he dressed in a female disguise, which entailed balancing on high heels while clutching his handbag. It was delightful to stride through his neighborhood in sneakers and without teetering on aching feet.

He tried to imagine what Angelica might be doing at that very moment. After the debacle in Vienna years ago she must be trying to stay calm. He wondered if she still used the custom Electric Laughter device he had designed for her or if anything associated with him was banished from her life.

The mere thought of the live Angelica made Joe's heart ache. He missed her deeply. Not the hologram of Angelica or the Angelica of his imagination, but he missed the real Angelica, the one he fell in love with in Switzerland so many years ago.

He remembered the first time he spoke with her on the phone, a meeting arranged by his mentor, Dr. First soon after her alleged breakdown. Her voice sounded so soft and far away, as if she had fallen down a tunnel of feathers and the only thread between her abyss and the world above was the sweet melodic, muffled sound of her voice.

Joe asked her a few questions about her Synesthesia and the episode that caused her brain to go into some kind of overdrive, then shut down into a self-induced coma. Joe surmised that an absence of stimuli was one way that the brain was protecting itself and inducing the coma so it

could recover. The psychiatrists likened her coma to hysterical blindness or some such nonsense. Joe assured her that her brain anomaly with its sight and sound fusion was a gift and not a curse. He believed that he could help her reroute the sensory overload and offered to create a custom Electric Laughter device that would quickly dissipate another sensory storm with laughter and eventually, calm. He imagined what it must be like living inside her brain, like a non-stop, real life version of the animated movie, Fantasia. It must be exhausting, yet invigorating.

The moment Electric Laughter became available to the general consumer market, it took off like a rocket and launched Joe into a stratosphere of fame and fortune that threatened to devour him and his sanity. He had spent almost a decade designing and perfecting the device so it could adapt automatically to variances in the brains of the general population. His degrees in medicine, neurology, neuroscience, and electrical engineering were aided by the work being done in artificial intelligence and virtual reality. The technology had arrived. All Joe had to do was to put the right pieces together and add a little ingenuity to reconfigure the human condition. Now sadness had a cure, albeit temporary, but still, a cure. He believed in his heart and soul that he was doing mankind a great service.

He thought back to the grief that nearly devoured his mother when his father and younger brother were killed in a car accident. There was so much sadness in the world. Why not add a little laughter and happiness? It didn't matter to Joe that it was artificially induced. Everything seemed to be artificial from sweeteners in his coffee to tan skin to breast implants to teeth and eyelashes and so much more.

As the medicinal effects of electric laughter were still being discovered and reported, Dr. First reached out to Joe about Angelica. She had been his patient for almost ten years since she

left Chicago in her twenties to study in Vienna, eventually becoming the First Chair Cellist for the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. Dr. First specialized in brain abnormalities at the Brain Research Institute at the University of Zurich and knew Joe from the year Joe studied with him during his fellowship in Neurology. The two men hadn't had contact in many years, but remained close in their hearts. Joe agreed to come to Zurich to meet with them.

Dr. First showed him into the exam room, which looked more like an office than a doctor's office. He made quick introductions, then left Joe alone with her.

Angelica looked at him, her eyes as crystal clear as the winter day and reflected the color of her sea foam sweater, which glimmered like a wave catching the sunlight. She looked younger than most women in their late thirties with her thick, silky black hair that hung down between her shoulder blades in a single, loose braid.

"Thank you for agreeing to see me, Dr. Coyote," she said.

Joe felt suddenly speechless. He was so taken with her beauty and her brilliant cello playing and the vibrant blue of her eyes that he could hardly respond. Before he said a word, Angelica's eyes got wide, as if she was watching something change or witnessing a birth, like his pre-speech hesitation was a baby chick hatching. She leaned in slightly. Something registered in her eyes.

"Please call me Joe," he said softly, his voice saturated with gentleness and emotion.

"Say something else," Angelica insisted.

"What?" Joe was truly confused.

"Say something, anything. Just talk, please." Angelica urged him.

He paused a moment. Her anticipation was palpable. “Is there anything particular that you’d like me to say or do you just want to hear me talk?”

“It’s the strangest thing,” she began. “I haven’t had this experience since I was a child.”

Joe looked stunned. He paused. “What experience?” Joe asked.

“It just happened again!” Angelica was delighted, her smile lit up the room.

“You have to tell me what just happened,” Joe said as he relaxed, even his posture changed.

“Don’t speak!” Angelica instructed. He obeyed, then smiled because her smile was so infectious. He was about to say something, but she stopped him with her hand. He shook his head, still grinning.

“Now, almost say something, but don’t actually say anything,” she coaxed him on.

He held up his hands in a relinquished shrug. He opened his mouth as if he was going to say something, but nothing came out. Angelica giggled with delight.

“This is a most unusual way to begin an exam,” Joe said as he took out a pen light from his pocket, eager to get close enough to look into those sparkling eyes of hers. “Care to share?”

“When I was a little girl, I was sometimes able to see the colors in a person’s voice even before they spoke. It just happened again with you.”

“Is that a good thing?” he asked as he motioned for her to open her eyes wide so he could look in them with his penlight.

“It is a great thing!” she declared. “It makes me feel like I still have that certain something that comes with my condition.”

“*That certain something?*” he asked.

“It’s hard to explain because you don’t have my brain, but it is sort of a combination of predicting the future and seeing into the realm of pure energy,” she explained.

“I don’t have your brain, but I’m in awe of it.”

She looked up at him, past the penlight, past his eyes, and *into* him, the essence of him. Something shifted inside Joe and he finally understood the power of the heart, or maybe it was the soul, which could never be explained in his heady, cerebral way.

“What does it look like?” He asked.

“Your voice or the energy before your voice?”

“The energy before your voice is like a shining beam of light, a beacon in the darkness that channels around you and shoots up into the air like an endless tree trunk made of colors and textures and movements, like a dance of swirls,” she explained.

“What colors?”

“Mostly deep purples like the color of the sky after a rich sunset and bright aquas, the kind of color that one would find in an ocean paradise, clear and shiny and bright. There’s also this crimson center like a beating heart or an umbilical cord that tethers you to the ground and reaches like a steady thread through the middle of the dancing swirls. It’s quite beautiful.”

What Joe had missed most about Angelica when he was in his self-imposed, isolation exile, aside from everything about her was the feeling of being connected to her, or more accurately, *knowing* that someday he could truly connect with her again. All he wanted was for both of them to be alive in the same world at the same time, the real world, not the skewed world he created when he agreed to have Graham become his interchangeable double. Joe despised himself for his own arrogance, for his own stupidity, and the hubris of believing that his life was

so important that he needed someone else to live it with him, that someone else should sacrifice his face for one that looked like Joe's face. But Graham sacrificed more than his good looks for Joe, which made Joe doubt that he even deserved Angelica's love after what he put her through.

Joe meandered through the tree-lined streets of Lincoln Park on his way to the Symphony Center with heightened senses and a fierce aching in his heart. He wondered if she could still see the colors of his voice before he spoke. He wondered if she would even know he was in the audience.

Joe cut through a back alley on his way to the lake where garbage cans overflowed and a homeless man scrounged through restaurant remnants for something to eat. Joe slipped him a hundred dollar bill and kept walking past a bakery, a coffee shop, and an Indian restaurant. His tastebuds perked up. He caught a whiff of the autumn air and the faint scent of rotting leaves mixed with garbage. He felt more alive than he had in the five years of self-imposed, solitary confinement. He didn't have time to stop, though he wanted to devour everything, even that starchy scent from the dry cleaners. It was life he longed to devour, outside the walls of his home, his fear, and his remorse.

Joe felt every muscle expand and contract with each step as he moved inside his body. It was like he had just slipped into it again and was trying it on for size, as if it was a glove or a wetsuit. These moments felt like happiness, not the artificial happiness he brought to the world with Electric Laughter, but the old fashioned kind of happiness, the kid with an ice-cream cone, sliding into home plate, first kiss kind of happiness.

A breeze off of Lake Michigan caressed him as he walked through the Lincoln Park Zoo. He lifted his face to the sky and visualized the sunlight melting away his guilt and his nightmares

and his paranoia and his sadness. He reveled in the cacophony of scents and sounds, like the pungent odor from the monkey cage, the mouth-watering sweetness of freshly spun cotton candy, and the harmony of birds chirping overhead, like flutes accompanying the cello music that unfurled perpetually inside his head.

Joe arrived at the North Avenue Beach overpass and stopped abruptly. It could have been anyone that day, Joe thought as he remembered the time he first met Graham Gold. By the time they met, Joe had become such a visible public figure that it took a team of security guards and local policemen to orchestrate his morning run through the park and along the lakefront. The memory of it was so clear, like it happened yesterday.

“He can cross with us,” Joe reassured the traffic cop who had just motioned for Graham to stop, giving priority to Joe and his entourage.

“But you don’t even know this guy,” one of Joe’s bodyguards argued.

Graham and Joe looked at one another. They were the same height, same size, appeared to both be in their forties, and both had similar, light-colored eyes. They could have passed for brothers. There was an instant familiarity between them, a cohort kind of camaraderie from the get-go. Joe was lonely even back then and this stranger on the street seemed like a good candidate for a friend.

“He’s my new personal trainer,” Joe said. There was a challenge in his voice.

“You sure about that?” Graham asked as he jogged in place, waiting for the light to change.

“If you’re not up for the-” Joe said.

“Are you sure you can keep up with me?” The light changed and Graham sprinted across the street. Joe followed leaving the bodyguards behind them.

Graham jogged up the steps of the overpass with Joe at his heels, but always one step ahead of him. Graham stopped at the apex of the overpass, halfway across the caged bridge.

Joe caught up to him. “You know who I am, right?” Joe asked.

Graham gave him the ‘you’ve got to be kidding ‘ look.

“I’m Joe Coyote,” he said.

“Really,” Graham said sarcastically.

Just then a carload of women in a convertible passed underneath them on Lake Shore Drive. They honked their horn while screaming Joe’s name, then they lifted up their shirts and flashed him their bare breasts. Graham smiled.

“Must be nice,” Graham said.

“Not really,” Joe admitted.

The three bellied body guards huffed up the stairs of the overpass. Joe and Graham took one look at them and without saying a word, took off for the beach. Graham was still one step ahead of him.

That was the beginning of their friendship, which started as a trainer/trainee relationship and grew into the blurred lines of sharing his public persona. After about a month of running together every morning, then lifting weights in Joe’s private gym, they began hanging out together. Joe had very few friends and Graham seemed to have dropped out of the sky with a past that seemed mysterious or maybe it was unremarkable or camouflaged into nonexistence. The two men were tailor-made for one another as new best friends. Soon they were going out to

dinner together and attending Joe's many charity functions as a duo of eligible bachelors. Graham moved effortlessly through Joe's world, as if he was on stage and played the part perfectly, never calling too much attention to himself and adapting to every situation with chameleon-like stealth. What Joe remembered more than anything was how much fun they had together. Graham was inventive and ingenious and hilarious. Joe was beyond entertained. He was soothed.

As Joe stood on the bottom step of the North Avenue Beach overpass, he felt a physical pang from Graham's absence like a toothache in his gut. He could hear Graham's voice in his head urging him to push through his pain, so he raced up the stairs, always one step behind Graham's ghost.

Joe was halfway across the caged bridge of the overpass when a panic attack gripped him. Sweat beaded up on his forehead. His hands felt tingly and numb and then detached from his body. He had that burgeoning feeling in his chest that traveled to his throat. Cars swooshed underneath him with relentless speed. Joe felt as if he were falling or flying or hovering over his body and not really inside of it. He grabbed onto the steel support of the bridge that formed an X above his head and zapped himself with a dose of electric laughter to calm himself down. Like a junkie, he waited for the endorphin rush to wash over him. He zapped again, then again. Joe's breathing slowed just enough so he could come back to himself.

Just then a car backfired as it whooshed under the bridge. The sound triggered a PTSD gunshot that lived just below the surface of Joe's consciousness and catapulted Joe to the moment when he saw Graham's face blown apart.

Then the memory sputters images in his head. Graham waving at the crowd from an open convertible during the St. Patrick's Day parade, flanked by his bodyguards, and wearing a fur-lined hat with the earflaps snapped up that hung low on his forehead, a heavy wool coat and scarf that he could sink into like a turtle, and black gloves. It was a gray and freezing Chicago day as he turned to face the camera, though most of his face was covered by weather gear. His personal ambulance was within view, following closely like a waiting omen.

The ambulance-as-transportation vehicle had been Graham's idea when they first decided to share Joe's public persona. He got the idea from Mick Jagger who was rumored to have used an ambulance to traverse the city during a concert. It proved to be the perfect way to get around town without being constantly harassed by the Paparazzi. They even kept their ambulance stocked with their own blood in a portable freezer and a little vodka for emergencies.

Joe had watched the footage so many times that he was convinced that Graham was waving goodbye to him. *He must have known.* The sniper's precision and the lack of evidence made it impossible to know for sure where he was perched at the time of the shooting. The investigation scoured all possible buildings, but the one shot was so effective that it looked like a Firecracker had gone off in Graham's mouth. His face exploded on live television.

The two bodyguards reacted quickly and covered him with a blanket and whisked him into their nearby ambulance. Graham was dead by the time they arrived at the hospital.

In the days and years that followed, Joe replayed all the footage he could find. He studied it frame by frame, forward and backward. The part that stuck out for him was the last few frames when the dark-skinned paramedic who had been in the back of the ambulance with Graham faced the security camera at the side entrance of the hospital. His voice had a hint of a South

African accent and sounded strangely familiar, or maybe he just heard it so many times that it was imbedded in his brain. Joe had no idea who the guy was or where he came from.

“A great man has died today,” he said as he looked right into the security camera, as if he knew it was placed there. The lanky, caucasian driver of the ambulance jumped out and headed for the side entrance. For some reason, they were at the construction entrance of the hospital so the sidewalk and the parking lot were abandoned.

“Goodbye, Joe,” The black guy said as he and the driver raced into the hospital without the body.

Joe tried to force himself to stop thinking about it, but the sound unearthed it and the memory was still reverberating. That parade was the last time he or anyone else saw Graham alive. Whoever killed him choreographed it perfectly, like true professionals.

The moment the paramedics disappeared and before anyone else arrived, the ambulance blew up from the inside, charring everything to an unrecognizable crisp. Graham’s body was burned beyond recognition, as if he was instantly cremated. The black paramedic and the caucasian driver were never seen again. They covered their tracks completely and no evidence was ever found regarding their identities. They vanished as completely as Graham’s body did in the explosion. It was clear to Joe that someone wanted him dead, but killed Graham instead.

As far as Joe knew, the only other people who knew about their arrangement was Sturgis Regan, his lawyer and business manager, the surgeon whose name they never learned, and the nurse, Olga who fell in love with Graham. None of them seemed likely candidates for the hit.

Joe didn’t know if Sturgis knew who was really killed that day. Sturgis never said anything to the media about Joe having a public double, which Joe appreciated, then it made him

even more curious. Joe didn't reach out to Sturgis to tell him that he was still alive because Graham specifically said not to do so. Graham was emphatic about him not speaking with Sturgis or anyone until it was safe to do so. Joe had no idea when it would be safe.

It haunted Joe that they traded places last minute. Joe was supposed to be in that car, but Graham took the ride instead. Graham had a letter and instructions waiting for Joe, which made Joe think that he was tipped off and knew that there would be an assassination attempt. It was just like Graham to think he could out maneuver an assassin. It was also just like Graham to sacrifice something for him. He didn't deserve that level of devotion, that level of friendship.

Joe trusted Graham more than he trusted Sturgis. It was too risky to reach out to Sturgis because Joe would be too easy to kill now. Everyone already assumed he was dead, so no one would miss him. He hibernated in part because he didn't know what else to do and because he thought it was the only way to remain alive. Joe was so mortified and filled with self loathing that he had hired another man to give up his own life, to alter his own face so the burden of fame and fortune would be alleviated for Joe. He became the heartlessly rich man he never wanted to become, the kind of moneyed monster he had always hated. The only thing that kept him from sinking completely into the abyss and taking his own life was the hope that someday he would see Angelica again.

Today was that day.

Joe hung onto the fence that curved over the bridge, caught his breath, summoned his strength, and crossed the rest of the way. He arrived at the beach feeling the weight of his body inside his shoes. He walked a little bit and then finally sat down on the cement wall that curved

out over the water. The sound of the waves and the soft cello music that unraveled inside his head brought him back to the present moment.

Joe indulged in another quick jolt from his Electric Laughter watch and let out a sigh as the acrobatic seagulls chased each other against the backdrop of the black Hancock building in the distance. He sank into a little bit of a trance as he watched the seagulls fly into the late afternoon sunlight, their wings illuminated as if dipped in honey or gold dust. He missed Graham.

The sensationalist murder of Joe Coyote had been so highly publicized at the time and the media gave it an extended shelf life. Books about Joe's life skyrocketed to the bestseller lists and every bit of his past was dug up and regurgitated through an opportunistic lens. Rumors surfaced about his public double arrangement and a theory went around that he might not really be dead.

Meanwhile, the planet was succumbing to pollution and climate change, the political abuses were beyond alarming, but still the story of Joe Coyote managed to maintain somewhat of the spotlight for months, years. Most of the publicity about him wasn't even close to the truth, though some of it was entertaining. There was even an oversized coffee table books that highlighted his romances and sexual partners, which was Graham's specialty. Joe recognized only a handful of the women and none of the men.

There were extensive investigations and dozens of Internet sites devoted to solving the mystery of his murder. They never found the killer. The body was so badly incinerated that it was unidentifiable, but Joe had a pint of his own blood in the ambulance, so they were able to identify him as the deceased through the DNA in his blood. Throughout the whole ordeal, Sturgis never said a word about the fact that Joe had a public double, even when asked about it. Joe

surmised that Graham's existence may have compromised Sturgis's authority over Joe's company. Or maybe he was just really good at keeping secrets.

Joe mulled over the possibilities for the millionth time in his head. Either someone wanted him dead and killed Graham by mistake, or someone wanted Graham dead and knew about their arrangement. The fact that Graham was murdered in the public eye swayed Joe toward the notion that someone wanted him dead. Who would want him dead?

Joe thought about Olga, Graham's nurse during his plastic surgery and throughout his recovery. She was probably the only person who truly had a motive. As long as Joe was alive, she and Graham couldn't be together in a normal way. Maybe she wanted Graham back and had Joe killed, but Joe couldn't fathom Olga as a killer or even the kind of person who would hire a killer. Joe couldn't fathom Sturgis as a killer either. Sturgis was more like a stuffy father figure than a Tony Soprano type. In all the years they'd been friends and business colleagues, Sturgis never exhibited even a tiny bit of anger toward him or Graham. He was always so refined and unruffled. The plastic surgeon in Switzerland was accustomed to keeping high profile secrets and was generously paid, so Joe doubted that it was him. Maybe there was someone from Graham's past who knew about the arrangement and wanted him dead. Implausible scenarios soared in and out of his thoughts, all seemed highly unlikely. Joe and Graham had secrets between them, shadows that were never illuminated, but Joe still couldn't come to any conclusions about the murder. Like a mouse stuck in a maze, Joe never escaped his own incessant questioning and he never found any answers.

In his heart, he was convinced that someone wanted him dead and that this someone didn't know about the situation with Graham. *Why did he (or she) have to make such a spectacle*

of it? There were people who loved Joe Coyote and others who hated him. Some people revered him for changing the human condition; others despised him for making so much money, even though he gave so much of it to charities. No matter how he looked at it, he was always going to be a prime target. It was best to stay hidden and safe, unless of course, he wanted his life back.

Joe checked his Electric Laughter watch for the time and suddenly realized that it was less than forty-five minutes until Angelica's performance. He walked quickly toward the Oak Street Beach exit. Under the viaduct, a young, strung-out, greasy-haired kid approached him.

"Hey Mister, you want to buy an electric laughter watch?" The kid asked. He was probably a teenager, but his face or maybe it was his expression looked decades older. Joe tried to get away from him, but he followed him.

"I've got one, thanks," Joe said as he turned around and walked quickly back toward the beach. The kid was on his heels.

"This one's not like all the others," he insisted. "This one is better. It's a trip, trust me."

"What do you mean? What could be better than laughter?"

The kid pressed his own button and lurched at Joe in a menacing way. Joe freaked out and sprinted toward the water. The kid rolled on the ground and pissed on himself. Joe barely looked back.

He crossed the street at the light where Lake Shore Drive curves, in front of the Drake Hotel where Angelica stayed that one time she flew to Chicago from Vienna to surprise him. He crossed again at Oak Street and hailed a cab once he was on Michigan Avenue.

The cab driver was a Jamaican man with midnight black skin and bloodshot eyes who never stopped talking. He was a Rastafarian with verbal diarrhea.

“Where’re you going?” he asked Joe.

“Orchestra Hall,” Joe answered.

“Orchestra Hall! They don’t call it Orchestra Hall no more. Where have you been, under a rock? It’s called the Symphony Center now.”

“Of course. It’s just down Michigan Avenue,” Joe said, fidgeting with the window. He rolled it up, turning the old-fashioned crank handle. He felt suddenly claustrophobic, so he rolled it back down. Then a gust of exhaust from a nearby car left him gagging, so her rolled it up again. The mere fact that he was out in the world and actually going to see Angelica Johnson in person made his palms sweaty, so he rolled it down.

The cab driver peered at him in the rearview mirror.

“Up. Down. Up. Down. You can’t make up your mind, can you? I hope you’re not that way with women, because I am and oh man! You have lots of trouble when you can’t make up your mind!” The cab driver laughed. Joe forced a smile.

“So you are going to hear the beautiful Angelica Johnson, are you not?” The cab driver asked, suddenly serious.

“I am. Do you like cello music?” Joe asked.

“No, I like Reggae, but I saw her picture in the newspaper. She is one fine looking woman!” he said as he smacked his lips.

The light changed and the cab lurched forward. The cab driver scrutinized him in the rearview mirror, then turned around to talk to Joe while the cab was moving. Joe felt the panic rise up.

“You know who you look like?” The driver asked aggressively.

Joe instinctively slouched inside his baseball cap.

“You look like that famous guy. What’s his name?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yes you know. That actor! The one who played Batman!”

“I’m Batman,” Joe breathed a sigh of relief.

“What is his name who played Batman?”

“Michael Keaton, George Clooney, Val Kilmer, Christian Bale, Adam West?”

“Yeah, him, you look just like him.” The driver swerved, nearly clipping a police car as he barreled through a yellow light. The driver kept his eyes on Joe in the rearview mirror.

“No, not him! You look like that poor dead billionaire, Joe Coyote. Remember him? I must have seen his face getting blown to pieces about a hundred times!” the cab driver said a little too gleefully.

“I can get out here,” Joe said even though the cab was still moving.

“You should say that you’re his long lost brother,” he said. “That you were given up for adoption at birth because your mother didn’t love you.”

“My mother did love me!” Joe protested.

“But think of the money, man!” The cab driver was giddy with the thought of it.

“Do you know how much money he had? More than a billion dollars!”

“I thought he gave all of his money away to charity when he died,” Joe said as sweat snaked down his spine.

“But they keep selling his Electric Laughter watches, so he must be making more money. Am I right?”

Joe tried to roll the window up, but it got stuck so he placed his fingers on the glass and tried to coax it up with one hand while he cranked at the window with the other, no luck.

The cab driver held up his wrist and showed Joe his Electric Laughter watch. “Everyone has one. It’s the best invention ever made. No more sadness! Anytime you feel like crying, you can make yourself laugh instead.” He pressed the button and gave himself a jolt of laughter and a jolly, baritone noise came out of his mouth.

The cab pulled up to the Symphony Center. Joe handed him a hundred dollar bill.

“I can’t break this, man. I just started my night,” he said.

“Keep the change!” Joe said as he got out and hurried toward the entrance.

“Thank you Joe Coyote’s long lost brother,” he called. The cab driver pulled away looking elated, as if he’d just met Elvis.

CHAPTER 3 - *Dropped Her Coat and Let it Crumple*

A sharp knock sprang into Angelica's dressing room from behind the closed door. It looked like a small gray thunderbolt and had a shiny, shrapnel quality to it. Angelica turned her attention away from the light pink puffs that emitted from the white noise machine she used to clear her visual palate before a concert. She closed her eyes to dispel the images made from the harsh knocking sound.

"Who is it?" Angelica asked with eyes closed.

"It's Gustav. I need a word," he said. The quality of his voice was red hot and seared through the door in snaky fashion, like a fire-breathing dragon. His German accent added to the sharpness of the sounds.

"Come in," Angelica said.

Gustav breezed into the room with an abruptness that made Angelica recoil. "Angelica! How are you, my dear?" He asked with a supercilious tone, another set of snake-like threads that uncoiled from his mouth.

"I'm fine," she said. Her voice trailed off in stiff lines of bluish gray. She could actually see how uncomfortable she was around him.

"I'm sure you're more than a little nervous! Just remember, if you start to feel overwhelmed from your *condition*, just look into my eyes," he said.

"My *condition* is under control," Angelica said.

She turned and faced the mirror and pretended to fix her makeup. Gustav angled his face into the reflection. He was a tall man, nearly sixty, with greasy gray, shoulder-length hair that he tied back in a ponytail. His tuxedo fit snugly, so the audience would see his broad back and well-

developed shoulders. As a conductor for some of the most renowned symphonies in the world, Gustav was used to being adored, not ignored.

“How *is* your condition?”

Angelica hated when anyone referred to her Synesthesia as a condition, as if it was an ailment and not a gift that enhanced her ability to play the cello amongst other things. She was born with a genetic differential in her brain that caused her senses of sight and sound to fuse together, so she literally *saw* everything she heard. Life fascinated her and her earliest memories were vivid and magical, like the way soft violet puffs sprang from her mother’s mouth when she sang her to sleep, or the bursts of colors from the crickets at night that rose like stars from the dark ground, or the sound of birds and chipmunks that brought ribbons of color to adorn a bright blue sky. Angelica naively thought that everyone else perceived the world the way she did. Explaining the difference to her was like trying to explain to a person who’s blind from birth what it is like to see. She was only five years old when she explained to her kindergarten teacher that the whining girl’s voice looked like she was vomiting black spaghetti into the air and could she please make her stop crying.

Tiny Angelica had to endure a battery of tests from her eyesight to her mental wellness to brain scans, only to discover that she was a Synesthete. It was the first time she realized she was the only person she knew who experienced life this way. It made her feel powerful and alone.

“My condition is wonderful. Thank you for asking.” She turned to Gustav. “Now if you don’t mind, my condition and I would like a little time alone before the concert.”

“I just wanted to give you my best,” Gustav said. His voice had a jagged quality that reminded Angelica of broken glass.

“That’s not really why you’re here,” she said. “You want to make sure that what happened in Vienna doesn’t happen tonight.”

“Well?”

“I’m fine.”

“Angelica, if you’re not up to the performance tell me right now. I’ve got a back up cellist waiting in the wings.” Gustav’s voice shot out at her with ugly tentacles. She moved out of the way of the sound of his voice.

“I need to prepare for the concert. I’ll see you out on stage,” she said.

“I also had them bring your doctor here from Vienna for tonight’s performance. Just in case,” Gustav said.

“My Doctor? Dr. First?” Angelica asked. She could see the excitement in her own voice.

“That’s him in the picture, isn’t it?” Gustav pointed to a framed photograph on her dressing table taken at her graduation from the conservatory in Vienna.

“Dr. First is here?” Angelica perked up.

“He just arrived. I didn’t know if you wanted to see him before the performance.”

“Of course I want to see him! Please send him in.” Bursts of magenta and purple swirled around her voice. She felt suddenly delighted, but only she could see it.

Gustav opened the door and Dr. First walked in from the hallway. *Waiting in the wings, indeed!* Angelica hugged him. She had to lean down because he was shorter than her and hugged her tightly back with his eternally boyish smile on his eighty-year old face. He had distinct features, not too unlike a garden gnome. She loved him dearly.

“I’ll see you on stage,” Gustav said as he left the dressing room and disappeared into the hallway.

“What are you doing here?” Angelica’s voice bounced out of her throat in colorful puffs.

“I came to hear you play, what else?” Dr. First’s voice was filled with his usual baritone blues and greens. She felt the tension in her diaphragm uncurl.

“Thank God you’re here! Just keep talking and I’ll be fine until I have to go on stage.”

“Of course you’ll be fine,” he said.

“Thank you for coming all this way.” She took his hand and held it to her cheek.

“I know it’s challenging at times, but your condition has also made you one of the finest cellists in the world, throughout all of history. It’s a gift!” he exclaimed.

“Oh it’s a gift all right. If I don’t go into seizures from the over stimulation!” she smiled.

“Do you have the watch he made for you?” Dr. First asked.

“I take it with me everywhere,” she said.

“Good, use it when you need to,” Dr. First instructed. “Now tell me what my voice looks like today.”

“It’s a deep blue and green and it rides around the room in gentle waves like water on a pristine beach,” she said.

“Oh, what it must be like to be you, Angelica!” he said as he reached up and kissed her on the forehead. His black and gray caterpillar eyebrows wriggled toward the top of his head.

Another knock on the door sliced through the room. “Ten minutes Ms. Johnson,” the voice announced.

“I’ll take my seat and see you at intermission,” he said and held her hands in his for another moment before leaving the room.

She took out the Electric Laughter watch that Joe Coyote had made for her years ago. This device was more elegant than the standard device with its sleek titanium face surrounded by a row of small diamonds and was designed to alleviate the over-stimulation from her Synesthesia in addition to making her laugh. Sometimes when she used it, the jolt released another emotion in addition to laughter and sometimes made her cry or feel a deep hunger or an intense curiosity. The effect was the same when it came to dissipating the build up of stimuli from the sight/sound fusion so she really didn’t mind. Sometimes she needed a good cry and couldn’t always release one on her own.

She put the Electric Laughter watch on her wrist and pressed the button. Her first laugh sputtered out in tiny pastel pebbles and she could feel the tightness in her shoulders begin to unwind. Her next laugh appeared in colorful bubbles that circled out of her chest from just underneath her diaphragm. The bubbles burst and left behind oily pink and purple ripples suspended in the air for an instant.

The next zap of laughter spilled out of her like tears or sweat. She laughed so hard that she cried and nearly wet her pants.

She took one more zap. This laughter settled into a soft wave of crystal blue clarity and had an underlying pulsing of indigo blue that exuded passion. At that moment, she knew she was ready to perform.

A quick image of Joe Coyote’s face flashed before her at the last release of laughter. She should have been used to it by now, but she wasn’t. It wasn’t the blown-to-smithereens face of

Joe Coyote, but his face from the first time she met him. He looked so innocent, so hopeful and raw. She loved that unadulterated face and never really understood what happened to his colors.

Angelica knew all along that it was dangerous to fall in love with a man like Joe Coyote, but she couldn't help it. He was in love with her too, she could feel it and see it in the way his voice wrapped around her like a warm, sensual embrace, even though they lived on different continents. At first he feigned professionalism of the doctor/patient relationship, but Angelica knew that was a ruse. She could literally see right through it.

What she couldn't see was into the darkness that sometimes surrounded him. For a man with his level of clarity and vibrance, she couldn't make sense of the dark edges that sometimes crept into their conversations like a lie or an intruder. Whenever she tried to illuminate whatever he was hiding, she only encountered more darkness, so she let it go. She would take the whole package, bright and dark colors and textures alike.

In the twelve months that followed their first meeting, they had exchanged letters, texts, and phone calls. She sensed something painful that she couldn't uncover, something beyond her grasp. So she focused on bringing out the heart in his voice, the pure love and kindness that defined him. She was patient. She would wait. She lived in Vienna and he lived in Chicago, which was not geographically ideal, though Joe seemed to be hiding behind the distance. She knew he loved her and she knew there was no one else. It wasn't that kind of darkness. Their relationship already exceeded any intimate relationship she had ever had and they hadn't even slept together. They hadn't even kissed.

Angelica ached for Joe's body. She yearned to feel the weight of him, the energy of him in person. She knew she could illuminate the shadows inside of him, if only she could get close

enough. Angelica had never felt so connected to another human being in her whole life and she could tell that Joe felt exactly the same way. *What was he so afraid of? What could she possibly find out that would change the way she felt about him?*

It took almost a year for her patience to wear out. Every time she broached the subject of being together in person, Joe was in agony he wanted to hold her so badly. She could see it in his voice that he was in love with her and tormented about being apart, but he could never fully commit to a time and a place when they could be together. She knew he wanted to be with her as much as she wanted to be with him. Joe always had some vague comment about the perils of being with a man in his position or that he was trying to protect her, which is why they couldn't be together, not now. After almost a year of patiently waiting for that time and continuously getting closer to her, she took matters into her own hands. *Perils be damned!* She had to know the truth.

Angelica arrived late one February night at Joe's Penthouse on Lake Shore Drive in Chicago. She knew where he lived because they had been sending one another letters and packages for almost a year. It was after midnight when she entered the lobby of his building wearing a white, floor-length faux fur coat, black leather boots, and gloves. She had checked into the Drake Hotel earlier that day, showered, napped, ate, and savored her own secret. She hadn't heard from Joe for a couple of days and reveled in the anticipation of her surprise. She imagined so many erotic moments and passionate fantasies that she arrived wearing nothing but the coat, the boots, the gloves, and her hat. Her eyes glowed with the delicious anticipation of it.

The doorman asked if he could help her.

"I'm here to see Joe Coyote," she said.

The doorman nodded and checked his register.

“I didn’t get a note from Joe.” The doorman hesitated. She wondered if this was a mistake. Maybe he was upstairs with another woman. By the look on the doorman’s face, she suddenly didn’t trust that he would be alone. She looked around the impeccably decorated lobby with its marble and steel and soft touch of white orchids in a red Chinese vase, the only color in a minimalistic motif. She caught a glimpse of her expression in one of the floor to ceiling mirrors and saw her face drop into dismay. The doorman noticed it too because he offered to call up to Joe’s penthouse.

“Shall I tell him who’s here?” The doorman asked her. He was a stout man with a horseshoe hairline that flanked his ears and balding crown with short-cropped, shoe-polish black hair, a crooked nose that looked like he could’ve been a boxer, was probably in his early forties, and loved to live vicariously through Joe’s conquests. All the women were really Graham’s conquests, but the doorman didn’t know the first thing about their arrangement. Joe’s penthouse had its own elevator that went down to the basement level, which was where Joe and Graham made their switch outside the watchful eye of the security cameras. Joe owned several other residences around town for the times when either one of them was ‘off duty’ as Joe Coyote. They made this a seamless process with their disguises and their strict schedules. Being the public face of Joe Coyote was a business, just like any other business.

Angelica hesitated at his question. She had come so far and didn’t want to ruin the surprise so she opted not to give him her name. “It’s a surprise,” she whispered to the doorman.

“There’s a surprise woman here to see you,” the doorman said with a honey-colored gloating at the end of his sentence. He nodded, then hung up the phone.

Angelica couldn't bring herself to ask what he said. The doorman looked at her, then motioned for her to follow him to a back elevator. She got on. He swiped his key FOB and pressed the button for the penthouse. The doors closed in front of her. She could barely breathe as the elevator lumbered up forty-two floors.

Angelica spoke to Joe in her head. *"I had this feeling that it had to be right now. I don't know why, but it couldn't wait. I couldn't wait."*

The elevator doors opened into an elegant foyer with a tasteful console table placed below a mirror. Both pieces were made of black walnut and seemed to be hand carved into a subtle, undulating movement. On the center of the table was a beautiful glass vase that looked hand blown in the style of Chihuly. Maybe it was a Chihuly.

The front door was ajar with jazz music playing softly in the background. Angelica opened the door and entered. The penthouse was dark and the wall of windows were aglow with the city lights below on one side and the dark expanse of Lake Michigan on the other side. An eerie glow came off the frozen lake as the moonlight spread across the immobile waves. Joe stood at the far end of the penthouse with his back to her, pouring drinks.

Angelica dropped her coat and let it crumple by her black boots, her jet black hair tumbled out from underneath the wool hat. She stood naked in the middle of his living room, warm and waiting for him. Her naked body glowed in the moonlight. Her heart raced through her veins.

Joe turned around and smiled at the naked goddess waiting for him. He moved toward her, taking his time as he took in the vision of her.

Angelica froze. This man looked like Joe in his features, except he didn't look like Joe in any other way. He had the same face, but the colors were all wrong.

"Don't say anything, not yet," she instructed him. Graham smiled as he approached her, extending his hand with a drink in it. She took it. He seemed to be enjoying this first part of the seduction game.

Angelica searched around him for the colors and the energetic essence that she experienced the first and only time she saw Joe Coyote in person.

Graham moved closer to her naked body with a serpentine slickness that she had never seen before and never imagined Joe would possess. Her eyes told her that this man was Joe based on his features and the fact that he was in this penthouse, but her brain and her intuition went on high alert. *Who was this stranger posing as Joe?*

Angelica closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them up, hoping to see that familiar channel of energy surrounding him, swirling with night sky blue and crystal clear aqua light that she saw the first time she met him. This time, she saw nothing, only a haze over his head with murky colors that stretched out sideways.

Graham moved close enough so that their nipples were touching. He reached out and caressed Angelica's hair as he gently traced his hands across the curve of her body. Graham was well-versed in the art of seduction and knew how to touch Angelica's body so it responded, blood flowed to her nipples and her groin. Her skin moistened. Graham looked hungrily at her and leaned closer to kiss her nipples.

This was the moment she had dreamed of for a year, but it didn't feel right and she didn't know why. Angelica was too stunned to move as Graham kissed each nipple and felt her body

rise toward his. He kissed her passionately on the lips, but she pulled away, confused and frightened.

Graham looked startled. Angelica looked horrified. He moved closer to try to return to the previous seduction, but Angelica knew something wasn't right. She grabbed her coat and headed toward the door. Graham followed her.

“Remind me your name,” Graham said.

Angelica let out a cry and could barely breathe. The colors of his voice were laced with green and brown, tinged with orange on the side, which stretched out horizontally. The tone of his voice had a hint of Joe's voice, but he was clearly impersonating Joe. This man was an impostor.

“Come back inside,” he cooed at her.

Angelica clutched the coat around her tightly as she moved to the elevator. Graham held his hand over the button so she couldn't escape yet.

“Please tell me who you are,” Graham said in a fake calm tone.

“Tell me who you are because you're NOT JOE COYOTE!” she screamed.

Graham pressed the elevator button. The doors opened instantly. She got inside.

“I am Joe Coyote,” Graham said feebly.

Tears streamed down Angelica's cheeks as the elevator doors folded together like two hands meeting in prayer. She rode the elevator down to the lobby, barely able to remain conscious. She raced out into the frozen night in shock and disbelief.

Angelica made it to the hotel and stayed holed up in her room for days. She blocked him from all communication and refused to answer his calls, or his texts, or his emails. She finally got herself back to Vienna. One month later, Joe Coyote's face blew up.

Back in her dressing room, Angelica shook off the memory of Joe with one more zap of laughter, turned out the light, and left the dressing room.

CHAPTER 4 - *Painted the Air Like a Canvas*

Joe was so filled with the anticipation of seeing Angelica in person that tears filled his eyes and blurred his vision as he entered the Symphony Center through the arched turn-of-the-century doorways and floated in as if he were walking into heaven. Inside, a larger-than-life black and white photo of Angelica and her cello smiled at him from the corner of the lobby. He had to resist the impulse to reach out and touch it.

Joe entered the auditorium with its domed ceiling as sacred as an Italian church and as mythical as the belly of a whale. He kept his head down and avoided making eye contact with anyone until he found his seat in the third row, center. He slid into the cushiony red velvet chair, which gripped the back of his cashmere sweater like a hug. He checked his Electric Laughter watch for the time.

He opened the program book and came immediately face-to-face with a photo of Graham looking exactly like him on the inside front cover, which Graham had posed for just a few months before his death. Their faces were flawlessly identical, though Graham's eyes alluded to his secrets or his penchant for mischief, while Joe's eyes seemed to reveal something fragile and melancholy in his gaze.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra gratefully acknowledges the continuous support from the Joe Coyote Foundation and for endowing tonight's performance. Underneath his photo were the dates of his life, *September 5th 1969 – March 17, 2015.*

Joe closed the program book and stared at the smoothness of the stage floor that jugged out slightly from behind the dense velvet curtain where the Chicago Symphony Orchestra was

warming up. The tuning instruments sounded like erratic traffic noises and plucked at Joe's nerves. He imagined Angelica in her dressing room, nervous, excited and downright terrified.

Joe was projecting. It was he who was nervous, excited, and overwhelmingly terrified. A wave of paranoia washed over him again as he noticed the other patrons looking at his photo in their program books. He pulled the baseball cap over his eyes and slid lower into the seat. A man behind him tapped him on the shoulder and motioned for him to take off the hat, which was a customary sign of respect at the symphony. Joe nodded and ducked lower as he took off the hat. He crouched down and tried to hide his face behind the open program book. He found a page with Angelica's photo on it, the same one that was in the lobby. He held it to his chest and let the sound of her playing the Bach Concerto No. 1 in G Major unfurl in his head.

A small, elderly woman with thick gray hair struggled past the other people sitting in his row and inched toward him. He suddenly wished he had purchased at least three tickets or maybe the whole row, so he could have had only empty chairs all around him, but that would have been even more conspicuous. He only bought one extra seat and now the idea of someone sitting close enough to breathe on him left him nearly paralyzed with anxiety.

The small woman reached the seat next to him and felt around for the number on the chair. Joe scrunched down even further, scrutinizing her out of the corner of his eye. He leaned closer to the empty seat on his left hoping she would keep moving down the aisle, but there was no where else for her to go. The small woman wore a red scarf and a classic, tailored navy suit that fit her perfectly. She placed her carved wooden walking stick in between their seats.

She felt her way to the seat and then leaned toward him. He caught the scent of her earthy perfume as her eyes looked past his left shoulder as she spoke to him.

“May I ask you a question?” she began.

Joe kept his profile turned toward her, afraid to look her in the eyes.

“I’m not who you think I am,” Joe whispered.

“Who I think you are?” she asked with a Spanish accent, her head cocked to one side.

“I have no idea who you are or what you look like,” she said with quiet dignity.

Then Joe noticed a thin, grayish film around her eyes like ice on a windshield. This little woman sitting next to him with the red scarf was blind. What were the odds of that happening! Joe was overjoyed and the immediately felt ashamed for rejoicing over someone else’s misfortune. He leaned closer to her.

“What can I do for you?” Joe asked with compassion.

“I was hoping you could read me the program. I don’t see very well with my eyes anymore,” she said, her voice unapologetic.

“Of course,” Joe said. He wondered how she knew to choose such a vibrantly colored red scarf.

Joe felt grateful for her warm, soft voice and for the fact that he was sitting next to the only person in the hall who would probably have no chance of recognizing him. He wondered what it must be like for this woman to go through life in darkness. Suddenly, his problems seemed like luxuries.

The woman smiled in his direction and leaned closer to him as Joe read her the program book. He skipped over the part about himself and recapped some of the other pages quickly. When he arrived at Angelica’s photo he described it to her in great detail.

“Angelica Johnson also suffers from a rare brain condition called Synesthesia,” Joe explained. “It’s so rare that only one in about a million people have it.”

“That’s fascinating,” she exclaimed. “What is it?”

“It’s a unique fusion where the sensory receptors in the brain fuse together to create a marriage of two senses. Angelica has the sight and sound fusion, so she literally sees everything she hears.”

“How extraordinary! It says all that in the program book?” the elderly woman asked.

“Not exactly, I just happen to know a lot about it,” Joe said, shifting uncomfortably.

“Are you a friend of hers?” she asked.

“Just an admirer,” Joe said.

“Thank you for reading to me. I can tell by the sound of your voice that you’re a very kind and generous man,” she said as she laid her hand upon Joe’s forearm. Her skin was rose petal soft and as transparent as an onion’s skin with blue veins and light brown age spots, which looked beautiful to Joe. Her palm emitted a cool and calming energy. It was the first human touch Joe had had in over five years.

“My name’s Gloria Amando,” she said.

“I’m Joe,” he said.

He checked his Electric Laughter watch for the time.

“Two minutes,” he whispered to Gloria. She kept her hand on top of his and let his inner energy register in her palm. Though her blindness limited her eye sight, she could read other people’s energy in different ways. Joe’s energy vibrated with love, anticipation, and emotional pain that seemed very present, not just a memory of a painful experience.

Angelica Johnson walked out onto the concert stage for the first time in over six years. The curtains were still drawn, but the orchestra had quieted down. Joe heard the faint patter of her footsteps and his heart sped up. He closed his eyes and promised himself that he would keep them shut until he knew for sure that the moment he opened them, Angelica Johnson would be sitting in front of him, not the hologram, but the real life version.

Gloria gave Joe's hand a little squeeze. She could feel or sense his emotions shifting, the profound joy and the aching sorrow, the anticipation that was as palpable as the taste of a saltwater breeze on her tongue. His swirling emotions moved her. *He moved her.* She caressed his arm and gave it a little squeeze to join in his anticipation.

Joe smiled. Even though Gloria couldn't see his smile, she could feel it. She also knew that he knew that she could *feel* him smiling.

“Almost time,” she whispered. “I can hardly wait.”

He squeezed her hand back, grateful for the physical and emotional connection.

Angelica sat at the center of the stage and faced Gustav. The orchestra was silent, poised. An occasional cough and other whispery sounds filtered in from the audience and looked like small, floating feathers as they seeped through the side of the dense curtain.

Then the curtain slid open with a whoosh that left a dusty, crimson cloud in its wake. Angelica froze for an instant as she looked out at so many faces staring back at her. The lights angled toward the stage were brighter than she expected them to be. The pulsing in her ears competed with the silence around her. She held her breath as a tingling sensation gripped her hands.

Gustav tapped his baton on the conductor's stand emitting sharp, red sparks from the contact. Angelica looked up at him. On stage he had a commanding presence and carried himself as if he was a Greek God incarnated, his posture inflated. She tilted her head in his direction, signaling her readiness to start. He raised his arms as Joe Coyote opened his eyes.

A spotlight on Angelica illuminated her jet black hair, giving it the smooth sheen of a mink as it hung down in a braid to one side, wrapped next to her long, alabaster neck. Her entire body glowed, as if the light was coming from within her instead of shining down upon her. She was even more beautiful in person, more breathtaking than even Joe remembered her being. The concert opened with his favorite Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major by Bach. The notes sprang out of her cello in clear, crisp sounds as soothing as they were energizing. Her cello resonated with emotion and passion. Her face was so connected to the music that she looked like she was in a trance or had just touched the center of some magical place where music comes from, holding the heart of it, or possibly her own heart in her hands, releasing it through her music.

Angelica didn't look up, but instead held her gaze inches in front of her cello so she could see the colors waft out into the dark cavern of the Symphony Center. The notes danced from her instrument in varying shades of blue and gold, then deep purples and shimmery pinks. The notes leapt like waves that carried to the far corners of the darkness. They ebbed and flowed with power and purpose. Bach understood how to compose in complimentary colors, adding textures and tones that painted the air like a canvas.

Joe was enraptured. The darkness of the auditorium protected him like a shield and allowed him to absorb every detail of her without being recognized, her creamy skin, her sensual,

red lips, her perfectly polished oval fingernails, and her cheeks that flushed with passion as she cracked open the silence with the first note of her cello.

Angelica paused then glided into the melancholy and mellifluous second Cello Suite in D minor with its introspective turns and purposefully determination. The pauses between the notes held great depth, great sorrow. She played it with so much honesty and emotion that it brought tears to Joe's eyes. There were moments when she held her head close to the neck of the cello as if listening to the whispers of a small child. Then she'd shift her energy and punctuate the music with bold head movements as if she was in the throes of passion. Joe ached.

The sounds that emerged from her cello were pure and powerful, radiating brilliance and freshness, as if this was the first time he had ever heard this music. Her whole body transformed while she played, as if she was merely an extension of the cello itself. Joe could feel her heart opening with each note. Or maybe it was his heart that opened with each note.

Angelica arrived at the end of her first solo. She concentrated on Gustav's direction as the orchestra sprang to life with the uplifting and lively Brandenburg Concerto No, 1 in F Major as the flutes and violins, piccolos, oboes, French horn, and all the other instruments vibrated around her with luscious greens, glimmering golds, percussive reds, and soothing, silky threads of violet and fuchsia that accompanied underlying layers of periwinkle and purple. The symphony of colors and textures and sounds and souls painted the most beautiful vision, which only Angelica could experience in this unique way. The beauty and the outpouring of colors and vibrations was almost too much for her to bear, but it's what she lived for, what fueled her soul. She continued playing, watching as her notes interwove between the others, an integral part of this ever-changing tapestry.

Angelica scanned the first few rows during an interlude when the orchestra played without her, looking for Dr. First. Instead, Angelica's gaze landed upon a blue-eyed man in the third row who looked up at her with so much emotion that it nearly took her breath away. Rising up from him in the darkness was a channel of swirling energy with midnight-sky purples and crystal-clear aquas. The footlights and the darkness in the auditorium obscured her vision so all she could distinguish about this man was his shiny baldness and his soulful blue eyes. He returned her gaze with the intensity of an embrace, which he never relinquished throughout the entire first half. *It was him.*

The sounds her cello emitted were bright, colorful, and skipped out to the audience like stones over a clear pond. Angelica directed them toward the baldheaded man in the third row who smiled so broadly that Angelica could actually see the joy escape from his chest even though she couldn't see his face. Very few times in her life could she see the colors of a person's voice before she heard it. There was a light golden mist coming from his chest, the way sunlight sifts through trees still moist from the morning dew.

Joe felt unbridled joy just being so close to her. Their eyes met for just an instant. Joe wondered if Angelica could see into his heart like she did that first moment they met in person and half-expected his skin to burst open and a torrent of love and happiness to flood the stage.

It only took an instant to feel connected to her in that profound and deep way again. In that instant, he decided that his reclusive days were behind him. He would do whatever it takes to clear his name, face his would-be assassins, and reclaim his life. The moment he laid eyes upon the real Angelica Johnson he felt something shift in his heart and promised them both that he would never lie to her again.

Angelica played from the most powerful part of her soul. With each stroke of her bow and each look from the bright-eyed man in the third row, her heart opened a little bit wider. And so did his heart.

Joe felt the love and desire flood both of them. Tears streamed down his cheeks, he could no longer hold in his emotions. He devoured every movement, every nuance of her body. He had never been this close to such pure beauty. She was exquisite, and the whole audience was enraptured.

Angelica wrapped him in the colors that sprang from her cello. Never before had anyone absorbed her music the way this man did. She noticed his tears and she sank deeper into the core of her talent. Never before had her playing been so inspired. Soon, Angelica Johnson had tears trailing down her face, over her sculptured cheekbones and into the crevices of her clavicle. Her music transformed her along with transfixing the audience.

By the time the curtain sashayed into place, Joe and Angelica had fallen deeply in love. The audience had fallen in love with her as well. They gave her a standing ovation and it was only intermission.

Gloria stood up next to him and touched his arm. Her other senses were so heightened that she could feel their energetic interchange.

“Congratulations!” she said. Her voice was barely audible over the thunderous applause.

“For what?” Joe asked.

“For falling in love with Angelica Johnson,” she remarked.

CHAPTER 5 - *You have the right to remain*

Joe arrived at the crowded men's bathroom, his body still vibrated like the strings of Angelica's cello. He took a quick pee in the stall and tried to compose himself. *Should he go backstage now to see Angelica or wait until the end of the concert?*

Without the darkness of the concert hall to obscure his features, she would recognize him immediately. There would be no way to hide his real identity from her, and he didn't want to shock her before the end of the concert. Angelica and the rest of the world expected him to be dead. He couldn't jeopardize her health and stability by showing up as the ghost of himself, as his real self. He wouldn't be able to explain it all to her in the few short moments of intermission, especially because he didn't understand it himself. It took all his will power not to go backstage and take her head in his hands and kiss her lips.

Joe splashed cold water on his face, his flushed cheeks like hot stones in the palms of his hands. He imagined Angelica placing her cool, delicate hands on his face. Every delicious, elated, painful moment of longing drove him further into this fantasy, this nirvana, this prison.

He looked at himself in the mirror as his eyes sparkled back at him. He hadn't looked this alive for years. Joe could barely contain himself until a shadow rattled him from over his right shoulder. A tall, gray-haired man with a square jaw and prominent features leaned toward him. Sturgis Regan tapped him on the shoulder. Joe broke out in a sweat. He submerged his face in the cold water cupped inside his palms and prayed.

He felt another tap on his shoulder. Joe looked up and reached for a towel to dry his hands and face. Sturgis handed him one. He took it and broke the illusion that Joe was imagining

him. Even with the emotional outpouring of the last hour there was no denying the look of recognition that crossed both men's eyes.

Then he felt Sturgis's firm grip on his elbow. He turned and faced Sturgis with a quizzical look like a child lost at the zoo. There was no point in denying who he really was or trying to escape the intensity of the moment. Joe was speechless. Sturgis gripped him around the shoulder and led him out of the bathroom.

"My God, it is you!" Sturgis said quietly with a slight cry to his voice.

"It is." Joe let himself be led by Sturgis.

"You're alive! Joe, I've missed you so much." Sturgis stopped talking, choked up with emotion. He led Joe through the lobby. His tall stature and broad shoulders rose above most of the other patrons. Sturgis always stood out in a crowd and not just because of his height. He was an imposing figure who commanded respect with his posture and his expression. Joe had no other choice than to follow him through the well-dressed Symphony crowd toward an emergency exit door at the far back corner of the hall.

"I missed you too," Joe said.

They arrived at the emergency exit door, which was slightly ajar. Sturgis hugged him just before they walked out. Joe hugged him back, terribly confused since Sturgis was not one for displays of affection. In the decades that he's know him, Joe couldn't remember the last time Sturgis hugged him.

Sturgis quickly regained his composure as he moved them hurriedly through the door and outside into the dark alley.

"What's going on?" Joe asked.

“That’s what everyone wants to know,” a voice said from the shadows. A policeman stepped away from his squad car, which was parked along the brick wall. A second squad car was parked diagonally so the alley was completely blocked. The door they used to exit clicked tightly closed. Sturgis stood between the door and the police cars. Joe was trapped. Two burly officers emerged from the shadows near the first squad car and walked toward him. The third officer crept like a predator along the wall in case he tried to run.

“I don’t understand,” Joe’s eyes darted like a caged animal.

“Joe, you’re being arrested,” Sturgis said as the policemen got closer.

One of them began reading Joe his Miranda rights. “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you. You have the right to an attorney,” The officer’s words flew away from Joe like the wind. He couldn’t grasp what was happening.

“I’m not Joe Coyote. Joe Coyote was killed five years ago. There’s a some mistake,” Joe stammered. “I might look like Joe Coyote, but-“

“Joe, they picked up your fingerprints from the taxicab. I was notified the moment they got the positive I.D.,” Sturgis said quietly.

One of the officers crept toward Joe with handcuffs perched in one hand and a gun in the other. Joe recoiled.

“But I have to go backstage to see Angelica Johnson,” Joe pleaded. “She’s expecting me!”

Sturgis tried to keep the officer with the handcuffs at bay. “That won’t be necessary. He’ll go peacefully,” Sturgis said.

“Go where?” Joe asked.

“To the police station. You’re being arrested,” Sturgis said.

“Arrested? But I didn’t do anything,” Joe said. He looked confused and despondent.

“Do you understand what’s happening?” Sturgis asked him.

“No! I’m just here to see Angelica Johnson.” He turned to Sturgis and tried to hide inside his coat like a child. “Don’t let them take me,” he whispered.

“I’ll do whatever I can to help you, Joe. I lost you once and I don’t want to lose you again.” Sturgis tried to reassure him.

“Please!” Joe cried as the three officers surrounded him. Sturgis tried to protect him, but they were quick.

“Help me!” Joe begged.

“I promise,” Sturgis replied.

“Angelica won’t be able to play the second half without me,” he said as they dragged him over to the police car.

Joe tried to wriggle free, but they held him too tightly. Then he kicked and fought like a wild animal. They slapped handcuffs around his wrists and forcefully restrained him. One of them punched him in the stomach. As he doubled over from the blow, they threw him in the back seat of the squad car.

“Perhaps I should ride in the back seat with him,” Sturgis said.

“This isn’t a taxi service. It’s an arrest,” one of the police officers said in a curt tone.

“I’m his attorney. This is a very delicate matter, one which has international ramifications,” Sturgis said.

“Save it,” the policeman said to Sturgis. “You’ll get your attorney/client session down at twenty-sixth and Cal, just like everyone else.”

“Do you know who this man is?” Sturgis asked, suddenly indignant.

“A law-abiding citizen like the rest of us.” One of the officers said sarcastically.

The third officer climbed into the other squad car and slammed the door.

Sturgis approached the squad car with Joe inside, hunched over in the back seat. Sturgis spoke loudly, instructing him through the impenetrable window.

“Don’t say a word to anyone, Joe. Not a word!” Sturgis screamed to him through the bulletproof glass.

Joe nodded, his face contorted with confusion and fear. The police car drove out of the alley. Joe caught one last glimpse of the celestial portal at the entrance to Orchestra Hall with its iconic architecture from the late eighteen hundreds, the pink brick façade bathed in the erratic red light coming from the whining squad car. Inscribed in a limestone band over the entrance were the names of five prominent composers: Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and Wagner who couldn’t help him anymore than anyone living could.

The weight of his breaking heart made Joe’s head collapse into his chest. He could barely breathe. He replayed Angelica’s cello concert in his mind, groping for the last remnants of his sanity as the police car raced down Michigan Avenue.

Back in her dressing room, Angelica felt like she was on fire. Her cheeks glowed and her arms vibrated from her performance.

Gustav burst into the room and literally bowed at her feet.

“I revere you,” he said. “You played magnificently. I was truly inspired!”

“Thank you,” she said.

“I had them record this performance. Thank God!”

“What?”

“It’s perfectly legal. It’s in your contract. I didn’t tell you beforehand because I didn’t want to make you any more nervous.”

“You recorded that?” Angelica nearly fainted.

Dr. First rushed into her dressing room. She felt enlivened and completely drained at the same time as she fell into his arms. Dr. First took one look at her and understood that she had pushed herself during the concert and was now delicately balanced. Dr. First motioned for Gustav to leave the room.

“Thank you,” they both said to him in a dismissive tone.

“Thank God you’re here,” she exclaimed.

“You were brilliant, absolutely brilliant. I’ve never seen such an inspired performance.”

“That’s because I fell in love,” she said.

“You mean everyone fell in love with you! You were magnificent.”

“No, really, I fell in love. I know it sounds crazy, but there was this man in the third row. I have no idea who he is; I just know that I love him,” Angelica said. She looked delirious, giddy and unglued.

“Angelica, sometimes in an emotionally charged situation, one can fall prey to one’s illusions,” Dr. First said.

“You don’t believe me. He’s in love with me too!” she said. “Just go ask him.”

“I’m not saying that this man isn’t infatuated with you, but love is something else.”

“He had the same colors as, well, I know it’s not him, but maybe there’s someone else out there in the world with his...” Angelica stopped.

“You were playing for him, weren’t you?” Dr. First asked quietly.

Angelica looked down, her heart beat faster than her breath could catch. Her hands shook ever so slightly. She tried to tread lightly on her thoughts about Joe, as if she could fall into a crevice of longing or relentless curiosity. The man in the penthouse that night wasn’t Joe, even though he looked like Joe. No one could change their essential energy that completely. His face haunted her with its midnight glow, the strange scent of desire, and the face of Joe, but not Joe.

“It could be love,” Dr. First conceded. “Just consider the context of the situation.”

“I didn’t imagine him,” Angelica insisted. “He was real, sitting right there in the third row center next to a small woman with a red scarf. I’m sure of it. I saw him.”

Angelica slumped down in her chair, energy escaping around her like a deflating balloon.

“Then I’ll find him,” Dr. First offered, hoping to lift her spirits.

“You will?” she perked up. He nodded.

Angelica quickly wrote a note on a piece of paper and gave it to Dr. First.

“Please give this to him. Third row, center to the right of a woman with a red scarf.”

“Angelica, this might not be wise,” he said.

She didn’t move her hand.

“I just want to protect you,” he took the note and tucked it in the inside pocket of his gray suit coat.

“This means so much to me.” She reached out her hand for his, suddenly needing something or someone to hold onto. A feeling of weightlessness seeped into her. The air became a pool of water and her body became afloat with the energy of the evening.

“And I thought I had a romantic streak!” He said with a lightheartedness that made Angelica smile. He squeezed her hand. She held on to him like an anchor. He was so close to her, it was almost as if he could feel her starting to float away.

Dr. First switched into his doctor persona.

“I want you to rest until you have to go back on stage. It’s hard work on the body all this brilliant cello playing and falling in love at the same time,” he winked at her, then guided her to a small couch in her dressing room and left her alone.

Angelica took out her electric laughter watch and put it on. She stared into the face and imagined a faint reflection surrounded by diamonds. She pressed the button. A laugh sputtered out of her like a garden hose turning on after sitting idle in the sun. The laugh took the pressure off of something in her brain. Her body felt a little cozier, like she had just put on a sweater.

The next few zaps had a similar effect, though the laughter verged on tears. She missed Joe, the real Joe, the one who called her every night before he went to sleep. The one who showed up that first day with his heart and his soul swirling around him with his brilliant colors and his layered, textured compassion. She indulged in the fantasy that the baldheaded man in the third row was really Joe. The rumors about his public double rang true for her and explained who that man was in his penthouse that night. She purposely never watched the video of his assassination and didn’t believe in her heart that he was really dead.

The next zap brought her joy, not laughter exactly, but a wave of contentment mixed with excitement as she sank into the sensation she felt when she connected with his sparkling blue eyes. The stage lights had obscured her vision, so all she saw were those eyes and the swirl of energy the bald man emitted as she played. She closed her eyes and returned to that moment. *Could it be Joe?* He was the only other person whose voice she could see even before he spoke.

She took one more ‘hit’ off the electric laughter device. This jolt surprised her. It was a nostalgia laugh buried deep in her memories that sprang out as the electric laughter triggered her brain. She was five years old again and playing at the ‘singing sand’ beach with her mother in Northern Michigan. Her mother, Johanna was only thirty-five at the time, younger than Angelica was now. She had similar, silky jet-black hair pulled back in a pony tail and the same aqua blue eyes that Angelica inherited. Her throaty laugh swirled around them with warm blues and soft pinks as little Angelica danced in the singing sand. The colors splashed around her feet as if she was dancing in a rainbow puddle. This phenomenon delighted her to no end.

Angelica had just been diagnosed with Synesthesia, and her mother celebrated her daughter’s uniqueness by searching for new ways to delight Angelica. Johanna heard about the singing sand near the Warren Dunes on the other side of Lake Michigan. She planned a summer vacation for the two of them and drove up from their small bungalow in Park Ridge, Illinois. Every day, they would walk on the beach or lay on their backs and make snow angels. The sand fascinated Angelica. It contained silica and had the right level of humidity and was made up of the tiniest grains that produced this other-worldly effect.

“Promise me, you’ll never be afraid of who you are,” her mother implored her.

Angelica promised her then and every other day of her life. The sand was magic and so was her mother. It was always just the two of them. Her childhood was like playing a duo with the most accomplished artist, only Johanna's art was living. Johanna being her eccentric and brilliant self had decided to have a baby when she turned thirty, but had no intention of ever getting married. She knew that an out-of-wedlock baby would get her disowned by her hyper-Catholic parents who were Italian and deeply religious. Johanna loved her parents. They loved opera music, prosciutto, strong coffee, and Jesus. They went to church at least twice a week and prayed and prayed, but could only produce one child as hard as they tried for so many years.

They were beyond doting and so smothering that Johanna could hardly breathe when she was with them. At eighteen, she moved to Italy under the guise of studying to be an opera singer. Johanna knew she didn't have the innate talent to truly be an opera singer, but it was the only legitimate way she could leave home and have her own adventures, her own life.

When Johanna was thirty and living in Milan, she seduced the married conductor of the Milan Symphony Orchestra. Having since given up her studies as an opera ingenue, she was working at La Scala, first in the box office, soon after in the press office since she was fluent in both Italian and English. She worked with English-speaking journalists and set up interviews for the conductor, so orchestrating a seduction scene wasn't too hard to accomplish.

Angelica's conception was a one-night-stand between the young, pretty press secretary and the wildly famous conductor. It was a planned pregnancy because Johanna could tell she was ovulating by the scent of her hands. About twelve days after her menstrual period, her hands took on a musty, salty, slightly pungent scent. She knew this meant she was ovulating. She didn't need to take her temperature or resort to some fancy kit. It was that easy.

Johanna hid her pregnancy for as long as she could and told her married conductor that she had a boyfriend, which they all knew was a lie. When Angelica was born in Milan, he sent flowers and a large satchel of baby clothes in all sizes. She took time off from her job. Then a year later when Johanna's mother took gravely ill, the conductor paid for her first class plane ticket back to Chicago. Her parents welcomed her and the baby with open arms and open hearts, which unfortunately were clogged-artery hearts from all that prosciutto. They both died within the first year after Johanna and Angelica's return.

Johanna inherited her parents' home, the remaining funds in their check books, and her mother's tailoring business. She taught music lessons in her home to make ends meet. She planned adventures and never lost her sense of wonder. Johanna's religion revolved around experiencing life to its fullest and loving everyone and everything so deeply. Angelica's religion revolved around music. They lived together in harmony, figuratively and literally. The colors of her mother's voice were the most soothing colors to Angelica, especially when Johanna sang her daughter to sleep with Italian opera songs and made-up lullabies.

The conductor must have been following her life from afar, or perhaps Johanna wrote to him about Angelica who was becoming a child prodigy in the cello. The first time she played with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra she was fourteen. She played her favorite Bach Cello Suite No.1 in G Major then as well, flawlessly and with the energy and innocence of a young girl. By the time she turned eighteen, the conductor was diagnosed with Pancreatic cancer and died before she ever met him. He left her a trust fund for her education.

A staccato knock on her door burst in with translucent brown bubbles. The electric laughter watch had softened her senses, rounding out the edges. She thought about the blue-eyed man in the third row. She was ready to see him, calm and focused.

It had taken Joe Coyote the better part of a year to program her watch perfectly for her brain. In some way, she had him to thank for falling in love tonight with the mysterious man in the third row. Without Joe's help, she never would have been back out on stage, never would have connected with *him, whoever he was*. Angelica took one more small zap from the Electric Laughter watch and got up from the couch. She closed her eyes and imagined falling in love and being lovers with the baldheaded man.

The commotion in the lobby made it difficult for Dr. First to maneuver from the men's room to the auditorium. A crowd had gathered near the entrance where the flashing lights from several police cars had everyone speculating. He considered going over to offer his medical services in case someone had had a heart attack but the police cars had already sped away.

Dr. First found the woman with the red scarf in the third row. Gloria sat perched on her chair, as attentive as a bird waiting for food.

"Excuse me Madam, I'm looking for the gentleman who sat here during the performance," Dr. First said.

Gloria turned and looked up at him. He could tell that she was blind by the way she held her head and by the chalky film over her round, gray eyes. She smiled at him flirtatiously, or rather, she smiled in his direction and seemed to be expecting him.

"He's not here right now," she said. "Please sit down, you can keep me company until he comes back."

“I’m Dr. Alvin First,” he said in his most genteel voice.

“Gloria Amando,” she said as she extended her hand.

Dr. First took her hand in his and kissed the back of it tenderly. The soft blue veins pulsed toward his lips. He sat down next to her.

“I’m enchanted to meet you,” he said and meant it.

“Enchanted indeed! Do I detect an accent, Dr. First?”

“Please call me Alvin.”

“All right, Alvin.”

“I was born in Switzerland. And yourself?”

“Argentina, though I’ve lived here for many years.”

Dr. First caught the scent of her perfume and breathed her in. She felt him next to her and answered his question before he asked it.

“It’s a special mixture of Rose oil and Lavender with a touch of clove,” she said.

“What is?”

“My perfume, didn’t you just ask me what perfume I’m wearing?”

“No, I just wondered what that scent was that you were wearing, but I didn’t actually say anything out loud.”

“You must have loud thoughts,” she said with confidence and a warmth that felt like an invitation to enter her life.

“It smells delightful on you,” he said, instantly intrigued by this unusual woman. A wave of familiarity washed over him. They seemed custom-made for one another. He could see how well they fit together. He, a diminutive man in his eighties with thinning hair on his head and

bushy, inquisitive eyebrows. She, this pint-sized, powerhouse of a woman with her passionate red scarf and her bright red lipstick smile. She bewitched him from the moment they met, or maybe it was her aphrodisiac potion that held him captive.

“We’d love to have you join us for the second half of the concert,” she said. “I’m pretty sure there’s an empty seat next to Joe and I don’t think he’ll mind.”

“Joe? Who’s Joe?”

“The man who was sitting next to me. He told me his name is Joe. Are you a friend of his?”

“I just wanted to give him something,” Dr. First said.

“A hearty congratulations I hope!” she said.

“Why’s that?”

“Because he and Angelica Johnson just fell in love tonight! I was here. I *felt it*,” Gloria had a knowing smile and her voice was full of heartfelt enthusiasm.

“So I’ve heard,” he said.

“From Joe?”

“No, from Angelica, that’s what she told me backstage,” he said.

“You’re a friend of Angelica’s! Lucky you!” she exclaimed.

“I am. I’m also her doctor,” he said.

“So you know all about her Synesthesia,” Gloria said.

“Yes, of course I do. How do you know about her Synesthesia?” Dr. First looked incredulously at Gloria, then at the empty seat.

“Joe told me about it,” Gloria whispered as the lights dimmed and the second half was about to start. She heard the soft patter of Angelica’s footsteps walking back on the stage and could feel his questioning stare. She patted his arm reassuringly.

“It’s going to be okay,” she told him.

Gustav tapped his baton quickly and bowed toward the audience. The lights dimmed all the way and the audience settled down immediately. Dr. First took Gloria’s hand and held it in his as if it was the most natural thing for him to do. This time she kissed his hand.

“You know I just fell in love with you,” he whispered.

“It’s about time!” she said. “It has been five minutes already. What took you so long?”

He laughed and held her hand close to his heart.

“I must be losing my touch,” she whispered.

“Not at all!”

He kissed the inside of her wrist where her soft, cellophane skin stretched over the branching blue veins. He kissed her wrist again, this time closer to the inside of her palm.

She opened her hand and released a scent that was pure Gloria perfume. He kissed the soft, fleshy side all the way to the top where a small line of callouses had formed, probably from using her walking cane. The way she smelled, the feel of her skin both tender and durable, the power of her confidence and her gentle soul. Dr. First was beyond enchanted and profoundly in love.

The curtain opened and Angelica arrived on stage. She glowed as she bowed to her enthusiastic audience. She sat down in her chair and looked out to the third row. Dr. First sat in

the blue-eyed man's seat next to the woman with the red scarf. The seat next to him was empty. Angelica gave Dr. First a quizzical look. He shrugged his shoulders and nodded encouragingly.

Gustav tapped his baton several more times to get her attention. Angelica was suddenly flustered. She hadn't even considered the possibility that the baldheaded, blue-eyed man wouldn't be there.

The music began and Angelica missed her cue. She tried to concentrate, but her attention kept going back to the empty seat in the third row. The sounds of the orchestra sprang up and flew by her with chaotic colors and shapes. Everything blurred inside the surreal tapestry of the music. She felt lost, confused.

She tried to convince herself that the man from the third row was listening to her from the back of the auditorium because he hadn't made it back to his seat in time, but she scoured the back of the room for his energy. All she saw was darkness. In her heart, she could feel his absence. *Something was wrong.*

Gustav tapped his baton harshly as she kept missing her cues. The sharp steel taps flew like small daggers toward her. She could feel them puncturing and wounding her energy.

Within the first few moments back on stage, Dr. First could tell that she wasn't going to make it. He took the note from Angelica out of his jacket pocket and handed it to Gloria.

"When your friend, Joe comes back please give him this," Dr. First whispered and handed her Angelica's note.

"What is it?" She asked.

"A note from Angelica," he answered.

Gloria took the note and placed it in her handbag.

“Is she all right?” Gloria asked him.

“I don’t think so,” he said.

Angelica’s complexion changed from rosy to ghostly white. Her body trembled and she kept flinching and ducking as if she were being tossed around by the overpowering waves of the sounds around her.

It was Vienna all over again. Murmurs from the audience rumbled quietly and rose up like a flood of gray, murky water as she struggled to breathe. She felt disconnected from her body and swallowed up in the unyielding colors that flew at her in a chaotic torrent. Her hands trembled and she dropped her bow. She took one last look at the empty seat in the third row and collapsed.

The curtain closed. Dr. First stood up quickly.

“My darling,” he said to Gloria.

“Just go! I’ll find you. I promise,” she said and understood the gravity of the situation.

He kissed her on the forehead and raced as fast as he could backstage. Gustav appeared in front of the curtain and apologized to the audience.

The backup cellist took Angelica’s place on stage while two security guards helped Angelica off stage.

By the time Dr. First arrived backstage, Angelica was unconscious. He checked her vital signs. Still stable. The paramedics arrived within minutes and together they rushed her to the hospital.

CHAPTER 6

Angelica opened her eyes in the ambulance and looked at Dr. First. Her eyes had a haunting look. Dr. First asked her a simple question, but she couldn't speak. The emotional and sensory overload that buried her the last time took days before she could speak. This time, she looked worse than she did in Vienna. He prayed for her resilience and her strength and wondered about the man in the third row. *How could he be so careless with his love and then just disappear!*

He was one to talk. Just ten minutes earlier he had fallen hopelessly in love with a woman whom he just met and one he may never see again! He cursed himself for not getting her phone number or giving her his number. He had no idea where she lived or how to contact her. She had no way of finding him, either, notwithstanding the fact that she was blind. *Careless, indeed*, he reproached himself.

Angelica reached for his pocket. He knew what she was asking.

“Yes, darling, I gave the woman in the red scarf the note. She promised to give it to Joe.”

Angelica's eyes registered something he didn't understand. At first he thought she was terrified or aghast, then understood that it was a look of recognition.

“She told me his name is Joe. There are a lot of guys named Joe in the world,” Dr. First said.

Angelica's eyes rolled back in her head and she looked like she was having a small seizure. He checked her vitals, which were still stable. He kept talking to her but she didn't even open her eyes again. Angelica had drifted into some other, remote place inside of her.

He tried humming because he knew that his voice held the colors and textures that comforted her. Angelica once told him that his voice looked like the clouds after a sunset or the color of the water at the horizon line. Dr. First loved her and feared losing her. He massaged her hand to keep the blood circulating. She was his family.

When they arrived at the hospital a small entourage of reporters had already gathered near the Emergency Room entrance. Dr. First insisted that they clear the area before opening the doors to the ambulance. Even if she was unconscious, he didn't want the sounds of the chaos and the flashing lights to accost her. The paramedics complied.

"I didn't know she was so famous," one of the paramedics commented.

"Neither did I," Dr. First said.

Angelica stirred. A troubled expression swept across her unconscious face. Dr. First motioned to the paramedic to be quiet. He was never quite sure what information would register with her while she was in this state. The ambulance doors opened and the paramedics wheeled Angelica into the hospital. Dr. First stayed by her side at all times.

Joe lost consciousness in the squad car. The last thing he remembered was the sharp, shrill sound of the taser that they placed on his neck as he was doubled over in the back seat from the punch to his gut. The next thing he knew, two burly police officers threw Joe into a holding cell and slammed the door. The cell consisted of a dank smelling toilet in the corner, a steel-framed bed bolted to the floor with no mattress and a sink that dripped relentlessly. Joe slumped against the wall as far away from the toilet as possible, which was only about five feet, not even long enough to stretch his legs.

He closed his eyes and tried to relive Angelica's concert, to be anywhere but here. He could still hear the sound of her cello ricochet off the inside of his mind, but he couldn't hold onto the vision of her. *Was it a dream or was it real?* Maybe it was too painful to think what he almost had and then lost so quickly. A pain, more like a heavy wave rose up inside his chest. Joe thought the sadness would devour him.

Miraculously, he still had on his Electric Laughter watch, but had been stripped of everything else, his baseball cap, his house keys, and his wallet. He took in a deep breath and zapped himself several times in quick succession, longing to escape this overwhelming sadness for more than a second. The sounds that emerged from his chest coughed out of him in tense little laughs and sounded almost like barks or cries.

Joe's binge laughter assaulted his brain until he saw flashes of light on the outside of his vision. He was seconds away from a seizure or a massive migraine. He pressed the button one more time and slipped into a memory that was more like a dream or a detour that his brain took to escape the same jolt of laughter. Nothing was funny about his life, nothing worth laughing at, even if he did invent the cure for sadness.

"First kiss," Joe asked Graham as he stared up at him from the weightlifting bench. The sun streamed in from the window behind Graham and obscured Joe's vision so he was talking to an impending silhouette.

"I was eleven years old and she was my hot, sixteen-year old babysitter. She had really big boobs and braces. You?" Graham asked.

"Behind the bleachers after the football game," Joe said as he grunted out a bench press with Graham spotting him.

“High School or college?” Graham asked.

“College.”

“What were you like, thirty?” Graham teased him. It was the early days when Graham still looked like Graham.

“Nineteen. You were eleven? You slut!”

Joe and Graham enjoyed the morning banter as they worked out together.

“Damn straight. And proud of it,” Graham said as he added more weights.

“What are you trying to kill me?”

“If only it were that easy,” Graham said.

Joe did a series of repetitions. His chest muscles bulged.

“I would have kissed a girl at eleven too, if I could have found one that would’ve kissed me,” Joe said.

“You meant kiss? I thought we were using the word, ‘kiss’ as kind of a code word for ‘fuck,’” Graham said.

“You had sex for the first time at eleven? You are a slut!”

“You probably didn’t know where your dick was at eleven,” Graham said.

“I knew where it was. I just didn’t know what to do with it,” Joe said.

“That I believe.”

“I was a science nerd.”

“Was?”

They switched places. Joe got up and spotted for Graham.

“What was her name?” Joe asked.

“Whose name?” Graham asked.

“The babysitter with the big boobs.”

“God, I don’t remember.” Graham laughed.

“You don’t remember? Your first kiss or whatever you claim it was. You’re so full of it.”

“So don’t believe me. It wasn’t like I was in love with her,” Graham said.

“Have you ever been in love?” Joe asked him.

Graham started to laugh in the middle of a repetition. The bar crashed against the bracket.

“You’re killing me with these questions, Coyote!” Graham said.

“So I take it that means you’ve never been in love,” Joe said.

“How do you even know what love is, Science Boy? You’ve probably got some kind of brain chemistry formula to prove it.”

“I wish I had. Now that would be something to program into a watch. You’re done.”

Graham got up. Joe added more weights so he could bench-press 200 pounds. Graham gave him a look that let Joe know he didn’t think he could do it. Underneath that look was really a kind of pride and encouragement.

Joe gave him back the ‘just watch me’ look, which underneath really exposed the look of a man who wanted to prove something to himself. There was more than a dance of wills. It was the common pursuit of men who longed for more than mediocrity.

Joe bench-pressed the two hundred pounds with considerable strain, but he did it. He looked up at Graham. Even from the upside-down angle on the bench Graham had a stunningly handsome, movie star face. His features were a cross between Leading Man and Boy-Next-Door.

“Give me two-fifty,” he said to Graham.

“No way. I’ve got the surgery in less than a month,” Graham said. “We don’t need you laid up with a torn rotator cuff. Two hundred is enough for today.”

“I said two-fifty! I want to try it,” Joe said.

“Then try it on your own time,” Graham said and he walked toward the showers.

“I’m not going to be a part of you injuring yourself. You’ve got to know when to walk away Joe,” Graham said. “That’s the secret to life, knowing when to walk away.”

“Oh look who’s talking! Mr. Self Control of the world,” Joe said as he gripped the bar and attempted to press the 200 pounds back up without a spotter when Graham turned around.

“Don’t!” he said from about fifty feet away.

Joe stopped and then gave him that look, the one that both men resorted to when they felt the need to test one another. It was defiant on the outside and pleading on the inside. Joe just wanted to know that Graham would be there for him no matter what happened.

Graham dropped his towel and stood in the spotter’s position. He instructed Joe to breathe through the lift and to keep his lower back firmly planted on the bench, his stomach muscles contracted.

Joe pushed himself to bench-press the 200 pounds three more times. The third time Graham had to assist him and actually lower the weights with him.

“Good work,” Graham said.

“Thanks,” Joe said.

They took showers and met back up in the steam room. Joe had a spa wing in his penthouse, which included a workout room, showers, a steam room, sauna, massage room and meditation room.

By the time Joe entered the steam room it was thick with dense steam and permeated with the scent of Graham's body. He had an earthy smell, like wet autumn leaves. No matter how much he looked exactly like Joe after the surgery, he always smelled distinctly like himself.

Joe noticed it right away. It was probably the alkaline balance of their skin, Joe thought. While Joe's scent was almost citrus-y, Graham's natural body scent was pure salt and mud.

"Let's keep going," Graham said.

Joe knew what he meant. Graham was on a mission to learn all the minute and excruciating details of Joe's past so that once he was Joe's public double he would have a foundation to draw upon that was authentic. It came from his training as an actor, or so he said. Graham nurtured the dream of being on screen, but never made it past a few low budget horror and soft porn films. It wasn't just his big appetite for attention, which bordered on insatiable, it was the impulse to want to escape something inside of him, if just for a short while, which caused him to crave the life of an actor.

At first Joe was reluctant to participate in the process. He had always been somewhat of a private person, a loner really. He had no siblings and only one parent, his mother. He didn't feel the need to dwell in the past, or even glance back and look at it, so when Graham suggested digging up all the details of his past life, Joe nixed the idea immediately.

"It's really not all that interesting," Joe told him.

"I'm sure. We're not doing this for you; we're doing this for me. I need to know the history of a character if I'm going to play him convincingly. Consider it part of my research," Graham said to him.

"I'm not a character. I'm a person," Joe pointed out.

“Yes, and we’ll be sharing the same persona so we might as well do it the best we can.”

Joe finally acquiesced and once they were into the process of randomly reviewing whatever questions or incidents that came into either of their minds, Joe discovered that he loved it. It was like having a non-stop therapy session for three months with his best friend who actually appeared to be interested in every ridiculous detail of his life. The whole thing bordered on total narcissism and it was the only time he indulged himself with that kind of attention.

Something else happened along the way. There were wounds on Joe’s psyche, unresolved and painful moments that left indelible imprints, which he couldn’t forget even when he wanted to because of the way his mind worked. Talking about them with Graham rubbed them a little bit cleaner so they weren’t so sticky and painful. Graham’s humor and irreverence took the edge off of so many of Joe’s stories. For the first time in Joe Coyote’s life, he came out from behind the shadow of loneliness that seemed to follow him.

“Dead mother,” Joe said through the hissing cloud of steam.

“Wait I know this one,” Graham said. He took a moment to shuffle through his half-full deck of Joe’s memories.

“Your mother, Grace Coyote died when you were in your second year of residency from ovarian cancer. She was fifty-eight years old and weighed only one hundred pounds at the time of her death.”

“Very good.”

“Not if you’re Grace Coyote,” Graham said.

“Good point,” Joe said. “Who was there?”

“Who was there? God maybe. I can’t remember.”

“At her funeral. Think.”

“I’m not used to thinking and I could hurt myself if I do it too long. Okay, I’ll try.”

“What was the name of the man who stood by me at my mother’s graveside?” Joe asked.

“Don’t tell me. I can picture him from that photograph. Little guy with the wacky eyebrows,” Graham said.

“Keep going. You’re getting closer,” Joe said.

“The neurologist from Switzerland who you studied with when you were younger. He was like a father to you,” Graham said. “And his name is... Dr. Second, Dr. First.”

“I couldn’t have said it better myself.”

Joe asked Graham probing questions about his past, but most of the time he deferred answering the questions.

‘We don’t have time for my life,’ he’d usually answer. Or, ‘When you get to parade around in public as my double we’ll go into it, every last detail.’ His reluctance to reveal his past gave Joe the impression of a dark secret walled up and inaccessible. Graham was hiding something or running from someone. Joe tried to pry it open, but he knew not to push it. Or as Graham would say, he knew when to walk away.

Joe got a glimmer into Graham’s sketchy past when Joe first approached Sturgis about the arrangement to have Graham undergo plastic surgery so they could become interchangeable. It was Graham’s idea to give Joe a break. He could see the way the invasion of the media in his life brought Joe to his breaking point. Joe stopped going out. Stopped answering the phone or the door. He stopped sleeping and eating on a regular schedule. He had to change homes several times and couldn’t even go out for dinner without being accosted. There was a burgeoning fear

of being kidnapped or killed, however real or imaginary. His nerves were fried and his life looked bleak. It wasn't that Joe was clinically depressed. All the Prozac in the world wouldn't change his predicament. That's when Graham came up with the idea of the plastic surgery so he could take Joe's place when it got to be too much for him. The two men had similar body types and the same color eyes. Graham's training as an actor helped him mimic the tonal quality of Joe's voice.

Sturgis didn't agree right way and did his due diligence on Graham with thorough background checks and a lie detector test, which Graham submitted to willingly.

"He might be a criminal or possibly a sociopath," Sturgis informed Joe. "He's got a history of arrests but no convictions."

"I know."

"You know?"

"He told me about it. No violent crimes, just white collar ones to help him make ends meet," Joe said. "He was poor and wanted to help his family. They didn't have healthcare and could hardly make the rent. They were two steps from homeless, like so many Americans."

"This is the kind of man you want running around presenting himself as you before the whole world?"

"He was going through a rough period. He's a decent guy. He wanted to be an actor and he didn't have any money and he was out of work. It's not like he's a sociopath. He just comes from a different background," Joe said.

"That's exactly it, he does come from a background, one that breeds sociopaths and serial killers," Sturgis said.

“You’re being dramatic!” Joe said.

“I’m trying to protect you. I wouldn’t be doing my job if I didn’t. This man can’t be trusted. You’ll never really know what’s really inside of him, what he’s thinking, what he’s capable of. It’s risky. I can’t advise it,” Sturgis declared.

“You never really know what *anyone* is thinking no matter how well you know them. That’s the problem with the human condition. We try so hard to connect with each other, to make friends and to have lovers and to have families because we all yearn to belong to a community, to belong to someone. We all yearn to have a true connection with another human being. But you can never really know what someone else is thinking, not really” Joe said. “Unless, of course, you can read their mind.”

There was no arguing with Joe when his mind was made up. Joe was convinced that he’d lose his sanity without a true reprieve, and not just a vacation, but a solution. Graham willingly provided the solution. It was flattering in a weird way, that someone else would so willingly take on the role of a lifetime, someone else’s lifetime.

Sturgis finally gave in and agreed to draw up the legal documents to keep the arrangement as clean and uncomplicated as possible. Both men were bound to the secrecy of the arrangement. Since Graham was running from someone or something from his past he would never blow his own cover. Joe was bound by his survival and his need for privacy and sanity. He wasn’t proud that he indulged in the ultimate Bourgeois purchase, renting the space on someone else’s face for his own convenience. Graham was more enthusiastic about the arrangement than even Joe was about it.

Sturgis was so invested in his own reputation that participating in this unconventional endeavor could erode his professional life and his standing in the community. In Sturgis's world, image was a close second only to money and power, which were tied for first.

Sturgis and Graham loathed one another from the start. "He's a loose cannon," Sturgis told Joe after the first time he met Graham.

"Sturgis is the worst kind of criminal," Graham said. "He's got more greed and less heart than anyone else you know. He's a card-carrying member of the fascist elite that's ruling our country and ruining the world. He and all his friends with their prep schools and the Ivy League bullshit and the big law firm with his name already engraved on the wall are killing this country. He's been raised not to give a fuck about anyone or anything other than himself. All he cares about is accumulating massive amounts of wealth, the kind of wealth that he could never spend in his lifetime. It's not like he's going to do anything with his money other than build the biggest sandbox in the world and buy the biggest toys to put in it and control as many people as possible and pretend that he's insulated from the real people, from humanity. It's a club you can't join, even you, Joe with your brilliant mind and your billions. You have to be born into it. They serve guys like me chopped up for lunch and they don't care. Sturgis is just like his cronies, a bunch of amoral, white guys who think they own the world. And you know what? They do."

Joe had never seen Graham on such a rant or upset as the day they went to meet Sturgis and sign the first round of preliminary papers. The tension in the air was so prevalent and so pungent that Joe could almost take a bite out of it.

Years later, as Joe waited in his holding cell after his arrest for Graham's murder, these conversations haunted him. He longed to see someone from his past and that someone was

Sturgis. Still, Graham's rant about him was strangely comforting, even years later. Graham was never afraid to tell the truth, especially when it was ugly.

He wondered if Sturgis knew something about Graham that he didn't share with Joe or if Graham knew more about Sturgis than he let on. *How did these two men know to hate one another so vehemently?* Their emotions went beyond the playground rivalry or the competition often found in a triangle of friendships. The closer Joe got to Graham, the more uncomfortable it seemed to make Sturgis. Graham never warmed up to Sturgis either. They regarded one another with quiet contempt, even when they were trying to pretend otherwise for Joe's sake.

The door to Joe's cell clanked open and two armed prison guards escorted him out. He searched their eyes for a glimmer of humanity, but they were trained not to look at him, or at least not to view him as a person.

They escorted him down a hallway to a door that was made of heavy wood with a steel reinforced window at the top. One of the guards unlocked the door. Joe smelled Sturgis's expensive aftershave even before he entered the room. It reminded Joe of that day in the steam room when he couldn't see Graham through the thick fog, but knew he was there by his scent. Joe entered, not completely sure if Sturgis was his only friend or some mortal enemy.

CHAPTER 7 -

Gloria sat in the empty third row wondering what to do next. She imagined clouds shifting and moving across the sky by a wind that was too high up for her to feel on her face. It was the only memory she had of her short-lived eyesight, probably from when she was still an infant just before she took ill with a high fever that confined her to darkness for the rest of her life. Her memory from that moment in time going forward consisted mostly of sounds, scents, and the roadmap of wrinkles on her mother's face, or her grandmother's hands, or her great-grandmother's soft hair that she'd let Gloria brush for hours. By imagining the clouds and then the textures of her various family members, she called upon them as her spirit guides to help her navigate through the world in darkness. She may be blind, but she never felt alone.

The concert had been over for more than a half an hour. The crowd had thinned out to a handful of quiet talkers at the edge of the auditorium and a few workers picking up programs and garbage from the floor.

"The concert is over Ma'am. Are you all right? Do you need me to call you a cab?" One of the workers asked her. The man smelled like onions and cilantro. He had a young sounding voice and she detected a slight Hispanic accent.

"I'm fine, thank you for asking," she said.

"They want us to clear out the auditorium," he said gently.

"Very well," she said and reached out her hand for him to help her up. She didn't really need the assistance, but wanted to connect with him, to see what his heart had to say. All she had to do was to touch his hand to get a sense of who he was as a person.

He took her hand in his, palm to palm as if shaking it. He helped her navigate down the row awkwardly, gently touching her elbow, then not sure if that was an appropriate gesture. In the short instance that she held her palm against his she could sense some sadness in his body. It had something to do with his mother.

“Do you want me to walk you out to the lobby?” he asked her.

“Oh no, that won’t be necessary, but thank you for offering.” She looked up in his direction and smiled.

“If you need anything just holler, my name’s Carlos,” he said.

“Thank you Carlos,” she said. “And I’m sorry about your mother.”

“Thank you,” he said. “She was a good woman.”

“She’d be proud of you, helping an old lady like me with such kindness.”

He started to leave in the opposite direction and then turned back around. “I wondered if you had the gift.”

“You have a gift too,” she said.

He walked her the rest of the way to the lobby. She maneuvered the steps with her cane while holding onto his arm. They arrived at the lobby when it was nearly empty.

“Thank you. I’m fine.”

Carlos pretended to leave, but stayed to watch her. She could feel it.

She followed the wall around until she arrived at an open door at the far end. She tapped her way quietly down the corridor of smooth, painted cement blocks and an uncarpeted floor.

She arrived at the backstage area and stood completely motionless at the bottom of some stairs that lead to the stage.

She read the hum of the floor through the souls of her shoes and the rubberized tip of her walking cane. Two men approached from behind. One man was extremely overweight and the other man had arthritis in his knees or hips. She could tell they were men because of the sturdiness of their stride. Women tended to walk more tentatively.

Someone else passed her in the opposite direction and she moved in closer to the wall. The men got nearer and then passed her. They smelled stale and sort of greasy, like over-cooked French fries. Must be police officers, she surmised.

She heard them knock loudly on a door on the far right side. Gustav answered the door and addressed the police officers in a formal, yet gruff tone.

Gloria filtered out the rumblings of the chairs being moved onstage, the vacuum cleaner buzzing along the carpet, the chattering of a woman's high-pitched phone conversation in the lobby and other distractions so she could decipher the interchange between Gustav and the policemen.

"Gustav Lawler?" one of the men asked. His voice sounded slightly bored.

"What can I do for you officers?" Gustav's voice changed to one of commanding presence.

"It's about Ms. Johnson," the other one said.

"Ms. Johnson was taken to Northwestern Memorial hospital for her *condition*," Gustav said with unmistakable annoyance in his voice.

"Yes, we know. We'd like to ask you a few questions about her involvement with the suspect whom we took into custody tonight," the other police officer said.

"What suspect?" Gustav asked.

“There was a man sitting in the third row. We have reason to believe that he was here to see her.”

“Everyone was here to see her!” Gustav said.

“We have reason to believe that she has been involved with him somehow,” the bored officer chimed in.

“Is he some kind of criminal? That wouldn’t surprise me considering the night I’ve had,” Gustav said.

“The man who came to see her tonight was arrested for murder. We’re told he’s Joe Coyote, the billionaire who invented Electric Laughter,” the other policeman said.

Gloria had to hold onto the wall she was so stunned by the news. Carlos has been watching and quickly came to her aid. He escorted her out a side door as she rewound the moments she spent with Joe Coyote, *the Joe Coyote*.

Looking back at their interaction before the concert, it all made sense and she wasn’t surprised. His voice was soothing and soft as he read her the program book, then it became animated and lively when he described Angelica’s photo and talked about her condition to Gloria. When she held her hand on top of his she felt a nervous vibration, one she tried to dispel with her own, more calming energy.

There was something else. Joe reverberated with a depth in his soul. He had equal amounts of sadness and hope, the magnitude of which he carried around all the time. When he fell in love with Angelica, he released something into the atmosphere. It was an essence of some sort that Joe had stored up in his body. She could almost taste it, but could never truly describe it.

If it had a scent it would have been like warm apples baking with cinnamon or the way the air smells after the first snow or after a long rain.

Joe's breathing changed about a third of the way through the first half of the concert. There were times when it seemed he held his breath. Other times he breathed in so deeply it was as if he was trying to fill his lungs with her music and saturate the inside of his body with the essence of her.

"Joe Coyote? I thought he died," Gustav said as they walked away.

"It turns out it was his public double who was shot and killed during the parade, not him. He's been hiding out all these years. Now he's being held without bail for the murder of that other guy, whoever he was," the officer explained.

"There has to be an easier way to quit a job," the bored cop said so deadpan, that Gustav had no idea he was making a joke.

"I know nothing about this murdering billionaire!" Gustav said. "I suggest you speak with Angelica Johnson."

"She's not well enough for questioning. They said she can't speak or respond, some kind of nervous breakdown," one of them said.

"Yes, I'm aware of her nervous breakdown. I was there. Let me suggest that you take this up with her physician, Dr. Alvin First. I'm sure he's at the hospital with her as we speak." Gustav excused himself and closed the door. The officers mumbled to one another as they left.

"Officers, I couldn't help but overhear. I sat next to Joe Coyote during the first half of this evening's performance. We were in the third row at the center. It's the best spot acoustically."

"You don't say."

“What did he look like?”

Gloria could tell that they hadn't noticed that she was blind. She smiled. “He looked kind and gentle, at least that's how I perceived him since I don't see with my eyes, but I do see with my heart. He was a gentlemen,” she said, her small stature and aura of confidence made a powerful impact on them.

“Did he say anything to you?” one of the officers asked.

“Yes! We talked about quite a few things. I was the only one sitting next to him. The other seat was empty. He was very helpful and read the entire program book to me.”

“What did he say?” the officer asked her.

“I'd love to tell you all about it and would prefer to sit down somewhere more comfortable. This might take a while. Perhaps we can do this at the police station. That way, anyone else with questions can ask me and we won't have to do this all over again,” she said.

The officers hesitated for a moment, which presented Gloria with the perfect opportunity to take charge of the situation. She reached out and took the heavy one's arm. She held onto his elbow while she clutched her purse and walking cane in the other hand.

“Lead the way,” she said. The officers had no other choice but to acquiesce.

They arrived at the police station amidst the chaos of the reporters and paparazzi. Gloria stayed close to the two officers, shielded between them as they lead her through the crowd.

Gloria sat on a hard bench while the officers explained the situation to their superiors. They had a witness, albeit a blind witness. She could feel all eyes on her and she rearranged her red scarf. She knew it was the red one because of the softness of the silk and the slight change in

texture that went from smooth to shiny laid out in a geometric pattern. She loved the feel of it on her neck and on her upper chest as it nestled inside her blouse.

A female officer approached her. “Can I get you anything, Ma’am? Coffee?” she asked.

“Just some water would be lovely,” Gloria said.

The woman returned a few moments later. Her hands smelled like cigarettes. She had a clumsy way about her as she placed the Styrofoam cup in Gloria’s hand. Gloria took her other hand and placed it over the woman’s hand. The vibration was unsettling. She opted not to trust this woman with Angelica’s note to Joe Coyote.

The questioning took well over an hour. The officer in charge of the questioning had a slight lisp and was meticulous in having her repeat everything she said. They recorded the conversation and all the while, Gloria kept one hand on her purse with the message from Angelica inside it.

She imagined herself taking the note out of her purse, handing it to someone (she didn’t know who yet), and then that person would give it to Joe. She focused her attention on the outcome, Joe reading the letter. She visualized it and asked the Universe to collaborate with her and manifest this moment into reality.

She wrapped herself up in the memory of how it felt to be next to him and then she infused it with the desire for him to hold the letter in his hands. If she could just get him the letter, she could give him a piece of Angelica’s heart and fuel the hope that he would need to survive his despair.

The session ended and Gloria was no closer to Joe than she had been when she arrived. The curt interviewer offered to have the two police officers escort her home.

“That won’t be necessary. You can call me a taxi,” she said. “I don’t live very far.” She was stalling.

Just before the taxi arrived as she waited in the front of the police station with the throng of reporters still piling in, she felt a sensation of movement. It wasn’t movement from the commotion around her, but a more subtle, quiet movement.

“Excuse me!” she called out to no one in particular.

“Yes Ma’am?” He had a low, slow voice and the cadence of an older person, possibly of African American descent.

“I’d like to use the facilities,” she said.

“I can show you where it is and wait for you outside, if that’d be all right with you,” the older man said.

“That would be lovely,” she stood up. She reached out her hand. He took it. She rested the other hand on the top of her walking cane. She looped her free arm through his and decided to approach him about getting the letter to Joe Coyote.

He walked her down another long corridor and told her he’d wait for her right there. He opened the bathroom door, described the layout of the small bathroom, and then excused himself. He was an extremely gracious man.

On the way back to the front to get her taxi, Gloria whispered to him about the letter. “I’m here because I sat next to Joe Coyote this evening at the Symphony and they wanted to question me about my interaction with him,” she said.

“Is that so?” the older man said, humoring her.

“But that’s not the real reason I’m here,” she said.

“No?”

“I’m here to deliver a love letter to him from Angelica Johnson, the woman he risked his life to see tonight,” she explained. “Except I have no way of getting it to him, unless you’d be willing to help me.”

The silence felt full of consideration. She could feel the vibration of him thinking, debating with himself.

“Give me the letter and I’ll do what I can. I can’t promise nothin’ ‘cause I’m just the custodian here, but I do have keys to most doors in the building.”

“Thank you,” Gloria said. “I knew you’d understand. I knew you’d help.”

“I ain’t promising nothin’”

“I appreciate your honesty and your bravery.”

When he tucked Gloria into the backseat of the cab, she took his hand in her hand for an instant and basked in an overwhelming feeling of warmth.

“You take care or yourself now,” he said to her.

“You too,” she said.

“Where to?” The lime-scented cab driver asked.

“Northwestern Memorial Hospital,” she said.

CHAPTER 8

Dr. First wheeled Angelica to her private room in the hospital in the middle of the night as the sound of an old woman laughing at the end of the corridor pierced the silence. He frowned over at the attendant who was with him. He had specifically requested a non-psychiatric floor. Angelica wasn't mentally unwell. She was just neurologically challenged.

“This isn't the loony bin,” the attendant assured him.

“No?”

“She's probably dying. Lots of patients nowadays like to have their last laugh with the Electric Laughter watch before they leave this earth. They say it helps them cross over to the other side, if you believe in that sort of thing.”

As they got close to the laughing woman's room, Dr. First peeked in. The woman looked to be about a hundred years old. She had a mane of white hair that seemed to levitate from her head. Her eyes and her mouth were wide open but no sound came out. She wasn't blinking and looked like a surrealist painting of her last laugh. A hospice nurse announced the moment of death as they passed by.

They arrived at Angelica's private room at the end of the hall. The attendant helped Dr. First move her onto the bed. She was set up with monitors that read her vital signs. It was an oversized room, large enough to accommodate another person, but the other bed was empty.

Angelica's brain was still unraveling the tangled mass of sounds and corresponding images that overloaded her neurotransmitters during the performance. She had slipped into a slightly catatonic state from the sensory overload brought on by the emotional distress. The

chaotic, colorful web of the music still spun inside her head. Her body looked limp, except for a few involuntary convulsions.

An armed security guard arrived after the attendant left. He took a chair and placed it outside Angelica's door.

"What are you doing here?" Dr. First asked him.

"Hospital security sent me. We don't want any trouble," he said. His voice had a curt, twang to it.

"Any trouble? My patient is one of the finest musicians in the world. She's not going to cause any trouble."

"It's not her we're worried about; it's the press. Those damn Paparazzi," he said. "One time we had a famous TV doctor here for what he thought was an appendicitis attack and it turned out to be nothing more than bad gas, but the reporters and photographers wouldn't leave him alone."

"I see. Well, thank you for protecting her," Dr. First said as he went into Angelica's room and closed the door.

The last thing she needed was to be accosted by an out-of-control mob of reporters. He shuddered.

Her seizures appeared to be under control, though her legs still twitched occasionally. He didn't want to give her any more of the sedative he had administered in the ambulance because he could never be certain as to the effect it would have on her brain. The last thing he wanted to do was to make matters worse.

He stroked her soft cheek as he sat by her bedside. She stirred slightly then settled into what looked like a deep, dreamless sleep. How much this young woman has suffered, he thought. What is it about romantics that they can't see the brick wall they are about to drive into head on?

Dr. First turned on the television without the sound. Reruns of Seinfeld, Friends, and Late Night talk shows flashed before him. While flipping through one of the news channels, he saw an old photograph of Joe Coyote, the one that was in the program book. He stopped and watched it.

The next image he saw was of a man who looked a lot like Joe Coyote, except he was bald, bearded, thinner and had a haunted look in his eyes. Dr. First assumed that he might have been a relative of Joe's who had finally been arrested for Joe's murder. He didn't expect it to be Joe himself.

The next caption read, 'Presumed Dead Billionaire Arrested tonight at Chicago's Symphony Center.' Dr. First didn't dare turn up the sound for fear of disturbing Angelica. Or worse, alerting her subconscious to the fact that Joe Coyote wasn't really dead. Dr. First could barely process the information, he was sure that if Angelica found out about it right now, he could lose her. Even he felt the emotional shock run through his body, which felt numb and weak. Joe Coyote was alive!

He searched all the channels and pieced the story together through the photos and the captions without turning on the sound. He figured out was that there was another man who acted as his public double and who was at the parade the day Joe was allegedly murdered. He couldn't figure out where Joe had been all this time or why he had been arrested tonight.

Then a photo of the Symphony Center flashed before him and he understood the magnitude of the situation. The man Angelica fell in love with tonight, the man in the third row

who he was supposed to give a letter to, who never showed back up for the second half was the original Joe Coyote. Angelica fell in love with Joe Coyote again.

He quickly turned off the television and focused his attention on Angelica. He sat down beside her bed and took her hand. Her body temperature was cool. Her pulse was steady. Dr. First was still shaking from the news. He was tempted to turn the television back on, but decided against it. What if she found out now, it would be a disaster. He sat there in the shadows wondering what to do.

Dr. First thought of Gloria. She spent her whole life in the dark and the first half of the concert with Joe Coyote. She didn't even know who he was and she still had the letter that Angelica wrote to him. He had to admit, he missed Joe terribly. Before he was murdered (or disappeared) they had had a terrible falling out at one of his charity functions. Dr. First was acting like the proud parent and wanted Joe to explain the discovery of the neurological chart that mapped out a person's emotional DNA to the head of the National Institute for Mental Health. Joe turned on him with such rudeness that Dr. First thought he might be kidding.

"Explain it yourself old man, or do you not understand it?" Joe said to Dr. First. He seemed a little drunk, which wasn't like Joe at all. He never drank. Then Joe walked away in a huff. Dr. First was so flabbergasted that he didn't know what to do or to say. He confronted Joe later in the evening and asked him if he was under a great deal of emotional stress. It was the only thing he could think of that would explain Joe's behavior. Dr. First really loved Joe and was concerned about him. Joe told him not to contact him anymore. "It's for both our sake," he said.

All attempts to contact him were rebuffed. After all they had been through together, Dr. First was heartbroken. Shortly after that episode, Angelica had her encounter with him and then

he was murdered, or supposedly murdered. Joe just wasn't himself. Now Dr. First understood why he behaved so horribly, so erratically, *he literally wasn't himself*.

Dr. First poked his head out the door and asked the guard if he would run down to the twenty-four hour store on the corner and get him a newspaper. The guard hesitated. Dr. First assured him that they'd be fine for the few moments while he was gone. The lure of freshly brewed coffee and a donut was enough.

It wasn't even five minutes later when a wiry guy in his mid-thirties barged in and started grilling Dr. First.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but can you just tell me what the patient's relationship was with Joe Coyote?" he said in loud, obnoxious voice.

Dr. First physically pushed him toward the door. Before he could get him out of the room, he snapped a couple of photos of Angelica looking like a wax incarnation of Sleeping Beauty and Dr. First looked like her crazed protector. The guy was strong and it took all of Dr. First's strength to keep him away from Angelica. He called for the nurse and together, they finally pushed the intruder out the door.

"You can run, but you can't hide," the wiry journalist said sardonically.

Dr. First called security and asked for some assistance. Two other guards arrived before the first guard returned with the newspaper. By then, word was out where Angelica was located and reporters were clamoring to get to her.

Dr. First could tell that Angelica became even more agitated in her unconscious state because of the painful expressions on her face. The new sounds from the commotion in the room added unwanted layers of chaotic colors and patterns to her already over-loaded brain. Her only

defense was to sink further into the corners of her unconscious mind. From inside her unconscious state, she saw herself as being buried in the sedimentary rock of colors and emotions and sounds that found their way to her.

Dr. First searched his mind for a place to take Angelica. Some place that was not a hospital or a rehab facility where the Paparazzi could find her and hound her. Since her mother's death last year, Angelica had taken an extended sabbatical from her position as first Cellist with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and was living in her childhood home while she wrapped things up. Taking her back to her mother's home was out of the question. It would be too easy to trace her there and was probably already teeming with reporters ready to pounce on her with questions and photographs. No wonder why Joe Coyote felt the need to resort to having a public double. This invasion of their privacy was exhausting, and he had only endured it for a handful of hours. Joe has a lifetime of this intrusion of his private space. Dr. First closed his eyes. A weariness settled into his body. He thought about Gloria, the way she smelled, the sound of her voice with that hint of an accent and the soft lilt at the end of each sentence. It had been almost two decades since his wife of forty years had passed away and he never imagined that spark of attraction would ever be ignited again, not at his age, not now. He felt a stinging delight that his heart was opening again and his sexual desire was reawakening, but had neglected to get her phone number or any other means to contact her. He scrolled through scenarios in his mind with schemes to find out where she lived when sleep overtook him.

Gloria settled into the back seat and instructed the cab driver to drop her at the Emergency Entrance to Northwestern Memorial Hospital. She placed both hands on top of her carved walking stick, then laid her cheek on top of her hands. She was so tired, but could only let

herself rest and not sleep. The knob at the top of the walking stick had a carving of three angels, which represented her mother, her grandmother, and her great grandmother. Gloria chanted softly to invoke her spirit guides to help her find them.

The cab pulled up and stopped behind a small crowd that was being disbursed.

“How much do I owe you?” she asked the driver.

“Nothing,” he replied.

“That’s very generous of you, but you deserve to get paid,” she said.

“I was paid by the guy who put you in this cab. I guess you didn’t see him slip me a big bill,” the driver said, his twangy Chicago gave way to a gruff laugh.

“I guess I didn’t,” Gloria replied. She kept the irony out of her voice and opened the door, moving her walking stick in front of her to scout out the ground for a curb or any incline.

At that moment, the cab driver realized she was blind. “Aw, Jeez, I’m sorry. I didn’t know you was...” He fumbled his way out of the cab to help her.

“That’s perfectly fine, how would you know?”

Gloria was already standing on the ground by the time he reached her amidst a ground swell sounds of reporters on the prowl for Angelica Johnson.

A booming woman’s voice addressed them. “I suggest you all move to the street before I call the cops, again!” The woman speaking had a raspy smoker’s voice and sounded like a large, imposing woman. The cab driver waved his hand and the sliding doors swooshed open next to where the booming voice was standing.

As the journalists carried their cackling conversations away from her and toward the street. The doors slid back into place.

“May I help you?” the booming-voiced woman asked her. Gloria tapped the arm of the cab driver and thanked him quietly for his assistance. His energy felt defeated, worn out. She wished him well and sent him off with some of her warmth.

“Don’t tell me you’re here to see Angelica Johnson as well,” the booming voice said, suspicion tinged her voice, as if she doubted whether Gloria was really blind.

“Not exactly,” said Gloria. “I’m here to see Dr. Alvin First.”

“I’m sorry, we don’t have a Dr. First on staff here,” she said impatiently. She could tell by the woman’s voice that she was distracted and not looking directly at her.

“I know. He’s Angelica Johnson’s doctor,” Gloria said.

“Again with Angelica Johnson! What is with you people? The woman is in a coma. Leave her alone.”

“I’m not here to bother her. I’m here to help, honestly. Dr. First is my husband.”

“He’s your husband, huh. Why no wedding ring?” she asked.

Gloria turned her gray, filmy eyes toward the woman so there could be no mistake about her actual blindness. The woman finally looked up, Gloria could tell by the direction of her voice.

“Oh, we’re not legally married. Please, just call him and tell him that Gloria Amando is here. He’s expecting me,” she said.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t call him. They aren’t taking calls and no one is allowed on that floor without authorization,” she said. Gloria detected a softer tone to her voice.

“Perhaps you can call the nurses’ station on that floor and they can let him know that I’m here. Please. You don’t know what it is like,” Gloria’s voice wavered with emotion. She wasn’t

referring to her blindness. What she meant was, *you don't know what it is like to wait a lifetime, finally connect with someone, and then have it all be gone in an instant.* The blindness she was used to by now after seventy some odd years of navigating the world with her other senses.

The woman picked up a phone and spoke quickly and quietly into the receiver. Then there was a pause of about three minutes. Gloria stood up tall. With her hand on the knob of angels, she conjured an image of Alvin greeting her again with a warm embrace. She stayed with that image for the next few minutes until the woman on the phone hung up.

“It’ll be a few minutes,” she said. “I’ll bring you to the family waiting room. You’ll be more comfortable there and out of sight.”

Gloria felt her face flush. She was suddenly nervous, shy almost. She held onto the image of the warm embrace as the booming voice woman led her to a large room that was empty and quiet, except for the hum of a large fish tank in the corner.

“Will you be all right in here by yourself?” the woman asked as she helps Gloria to a chair.

“Just fine. Thank you,” she said. Gloria waited a few moments until she was sure that the woman had left. With the dense carpet it made it more difficult to decipher the comings and goings of people.

Gloria got up and followed the humming sound to the fish tank in the corner of the room. She placed her palms on the glass. She only remembered two colors from her infancy, blue and white, the sky and the clouds. But she had a sensation of color from her other senses. Yellow vibrated with warmth like the sun, red smelled like strawberries, green was fresh cut grass, and purple was the cool breeze of the summer sky at night.

She held her palms open as if communing with the tropical fish that swam around inside. She imagined them in all colors as they swam around, slippery creatures, silent and squirmy like the fish her father and brother used to catch. The hum of the fish tank felt comforting and other-worldly, as if her angels were singing her a lullaby.

There was no way she could know that the fish swam toward her open palms, as if they were paying homage to her with some kind of ritual. Dr. First saw her again and savored the sight of her with her red scarf untied, hanging loosely around her neck, Angel fish swimming to and from her hand like puppets on a string, and the glow of the fish tank illuminating her face with a soft blue. She had a magical quality, and Dr. First felt humbled in her presence.

He approached the tank quietly, overwhelmed with emotion. She stood only four feet ten inches tall, but exuded the strength of a great old oak tree.

She sensed his presence before he said a word and turned, her face lit up.

“Alvin?”

“Gloria.”

He had never been so happy to see anyone in his whole life. She held out her hands. He took them in his. Her hands were cool and soft and tender.

“Thank God you found me. How did you find me?” He asked.

“I snooped around and heard Gustav tell someone that they took her here,” she answered.

“I meant how did you *find* me? The world is so big and people are always in motion, never staying in one place, and the odds...” he said as his voice filled with the tears.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“I’m so glad you did,” he said and drew her into his chest and hugged her. He kissed her forehead and she moved to find his mouth. She kissed him passionately until tears slipped down his cheeks.

She felt breathless. “I would have been here sooner, but I went to deliver Angelica’s note to Joe Coyote.”

“You saw Joe again! You are one remarkable woman.” He laughed at the joy of seeing her and the incredulous awe at her power.

“I didn’t actually *see* him,” she joked.

“My goodness,” he said and held close to his chest with the awe and protectiveness he felt in his heart. This embrace was even more profound than the one she imagined.

“I went to the police station and waited until I found someone whose voice I could trust to deliver it to him,” she said as she turned her face toward his so he could hear her clearly.

“So you know that the man that was sitting next to you was really Joe Coyote,” Dr. First said. “Did you know it all along?”

“No! I knew he was a great man when I touched his arm. I also understood that he had a very gentle, almost fragile soul. I was so moved by how deeply he felt for Angelica that I didn’t even wonder about who he was when he wasn’t sitting next to me. To me, he was just the man in love with Angelica Johnson.”

“He is a gentle man, at least the Joe that I knew. He was my student and my friend for many years. I’ve missed him terribly all this time,” he said.

“I’m sure you have,” she said with compassion.

“He didn’t kill that man, that public double of his. The one that died during the parade.”

“No, I’m sure he didn’t. The man next to me had no energy that felt like death or destruction. He had only love in his heart and this great sadness,” Gloria’s voice trailed off.

“He’s in danger isn’t he?” Dr. First asked.

“We’ll help him together,” she said. “When we join forces, we’re infinitely more powerful.”

He hugged her again and held her close for a long while.

“How’s Angelica?” Gloria asked.

“Not good and I don’t know how she’s going to recover here in the hospital. The paparazzi are everywhere. I gave her a sedative but I’m afraid when she wakes up, there will be no peace. She doesn’t know that she’s fallen back in love with Joe Coyote and I don’t want these media people tormenting her!”

“Back in love?” Gloria asked.

“Yes, back in love. They met in person once before when Joe designed a custom Electric Laughter watch to alleviate her Synesthesia. They fell in love through their letters and phone calls. She did have one more encounter with him, which didn’t go well. She wouldn’t elaborate, but she was quite distraught. Then the assassination happened a few days later. Now I understand that it probably wasn’t the real Joe Coyote, but no one knew that at the time.”

“Was Angelica just devastated?”

“It took her years to recover, if in fact she ever really did recover. When I initially asked Joe to treat her, I didn’t know she would fall in love with him,” Dr. First said.

“It was obviously her destiny to fall in love with him,” Gloria said.

“Just like it’s my destiny to fall in love with you,” he said and leaned over and kissed her again. She felt the hum of the fish tank surround them.

CHAPTER 9

Two guards deposited Joe in a small, cement room that smelled of stale coffee and sweat. Sturgis entered seconds after him from a door on the opposite side of the room. Before the guards could leave, Sturgis motioned for them to take off Joe's handcuffs. The guard with the keys hesitated, but Sturgis insisted. Joe thanked him, rubbed his wrists, and nodded at Sturgis who dismissed the guards.

As soon as the guards left the room, Joe lunged toward Sturgis and threw his arms around him in a hug. It was such an awkward gesture that Sturgis was taken aback and didn't know how to react. There were no windows in the room, not even a surveillance window, but they were being watched nonetheless.

"I'm sorry. I haven't hugged anyone for five years." Sturgis went through the motions of hugging him back and motioned for Joe to sit on one side of the steel table, which was bolted to the floor. So were the chairs. Joe put his head down on the cold table, inside the crook of his arms and sobbed.

"I'm sorry," he apologized to Sturgis as he tried to regain his composure, sitting up straighter and quickly wiping the tears from his eyes.

"It's okay. I'm sure this whole ordeal has left you... feeling not quite like yourself," Sturgis said.

"I didn't kill Graham," Joe blurted out. "I had nothing to do with his murder. Whoever killed him wanted me dead. I was afraid to come out of hiding, afraid they'd kill me or worse, harm Angelica."

"Angelica?" Sturgis asked.

“I don’t want anyone to harm her,” Joe said.

“Have you ever met Angelica Johnson in person?” Sturgis asked.

“Once, but I know Angelica better than anyone else on the planet,” Joe said.

Sturgis watched him closely.

“Joe, I’ve always been afraid that something inside you would snap. That’s why I agreed to let you hire Graham as your public double in the first place, because I thought having someone else to face the public would take the pressure off of you. I didn’t think you had the mental resilience to survive the world you entered into once your Electric Laughter watch became such a raging success.”

“I’m not crazy. I know it sounds a little insane, but she has kept me alive and sane all these years,” Joe sounded dead serious.

“Who’s kept you alive and sane all these years?” Sturgis asked.

“Angelica.”

“But you only met her once. Did Angelica feel the same way about you?” Sturgis asked.

“She fell in love with me tonight!” Joe sounded like a lunatic, even to himself.

“Have you considered that maybe you lost your grip on reality, Joe?” Sturgis asked.

“Maybe I have,” Joe said.

“Maybe I would have too if I were you,” Sturgis said. “I’m not judging you.”

“What’s happening?” Joe asked innocently. “What’s going to happen to me?”

“They’re going to take you away for some testing to an undisclosed location. It’s too big of a media circus around here to conduct a thorough investigation.”

“Undisclosed location? Investigation? What do you mean?” Joe felt sick.

“This is a matter of national security,” Sturgis said gravely.

“National security? I invented artificially induced laughter, not a bomb,” Joe insisted.

“They’ll need to make sure you’re telling the truth. It won’t be easy, but there’s nothing I can do to stop them.” Sturgis had a look of warning and apology in his eyes.

“Can they do that without charging me with a crime?” Joe asked, his wits coming back to him quickly. “I’m innocent until proven guilty. I have rights.”

“Under the Patriot Act, they have broader capabilities to discern if someone is a terrorist or aiding and abetting a terrorist organization.” Sturgis delivered the news with a blank face.

“What? That’s absurd! I’m a scientist, not a terrorist,” Joe insisted.

“There are rumors, substantiated rumors, I might add, that the Electric Laughter watch has been used to aid terrorist organizations,” Sturgis explained.

“What are they going to laugh themselves into committing heinous crimes?” Joe said sarcastically.

“Things would have been different if you had just come forward when Graham was killed,” Sturgis said.

“You’re the one who insisted on the iron-clad secrecy. You said it was for all our protection,” Joe said.

“That was before Graham was killed,” Sturgis said.

“I didn’t kill him and you know it,” Joe said.

“He contacted me the day before the parade and told me that you called off the arrangement, that you two had a fight over a woman. I was sure he killed you, so I’ve been looking for him tirelessly ever since.”

“But he’s dead and I’m alive! How do you explain that?” Joe asked.

“The question is, how do *you* explain that?” Sturgis squinted his eyes in an expression that Joe knew well and understood that it meant Sturgis was fuming mad, but would never show that much emotion.

“I honestly don’t know,” Joe said sincerely.

“Did you call off the arrangement that day ?” Sturgis asked.

Joe nodded, avoided Sturgis’s accusatory stare.

“Why?” He demanded to know.

“Angelica showed up at the penthouse and she thought he was me. He didn’t tell her and he had - I hated him so much that I could have killed him, but I didn’t kill him,” Joe said.

“It doesn’t look good, Joe. The guy you hire as your public double then fire in a fit of jealous rage turns up dead the next day and you go into hiding for five years. I believe you didn’t kill him because you *weren’t in your right mind*, but a jury is going to be awfully suspicious.”

“Why did you think I was the one who got killed and not Graham?” Joe asked.

“Because I know you,” he said.

“You’re right and you know that I’m not capable of killing anyone,” Joe said.

“You could have had someone do it for you,” Sturgis pointed out.

“I’m not capable of that either. We both know who I am.”

“Then who killed Graham?” Sturgis asked.

“Don’t you think I’ve wondered who killed Graham every waking moment for the last five years?” Joe let the question hang in the air for a moment. “At first I thought it was you.”

“Why would I kill Graham?” Sturgis asked.

“Because you hated him.”

“I didn’t hate him. I just didn’t trust him,” Sturgis said. “And I didn’t kill him.”

“He was my best friend,” Joe said.

“Joe, he wasn’t your best friend. He used you for money and led you to believe that he was your best friend. It was part of his technique as a con artist. He slept with Angelica and God knows what else he did to you that you didn’t even know about!”

“What do you mean by that?” Joe asked.

“Graham was greedy. I told you that when I first met him. He was a man without scruples, a man with no moral fiber, a man with a criminal past.”

“A man who’s dead because I was so arrogant that I thought it was perfectly appropriate to recreate my image so I could have more free time. And how do you explain the fact that he took the bullet for me? He knew it was coming because he set me up with money and a house and everything I needed to survive incognito, well almost everything.”

“I can’t explain it. Can you?”

“No!”

“It will look awfully suspicious to a jury that you were completely set up with money and a home and a new identity by some strange fluke or stroke of luck.”

“Graham did it for me. I couldn’t have figured all that out, especially on the spur of the moment.”

“A jury will never believe that you didn’t know about it.”

“I miss Graham,” Joe said quietly.

“All I can tell you is that the world is better off without Graham Gold.”

“Not my world, I spent every day of the last five years feeling guilty about his death,” Joe said.

“Even though you didn’t kill him.” Sturgis said with pointed meaning.

“I feel guilty about being the one who survived.” Joe insisted.

“Graham had enemies. Someone would have eventually killed him, even if he didn’t look like you,” Sturgis said, trying to be comforting.

“But I’m being charged with his murder.”

The guards entered the room. They gave Sturgis a look.

Sturgis whispered to Joe as they approached. “Whatever they do to you, say as little as possible,” Sturgis said. His tone was ominous.

Joe looked back at Sturgis as they led him out of the room. Sturgis looked worried, which really frightened Joe. In all the years he had known Sturgis, he never looked ruffled by even the gravest of circumstances, until now.

The guard threw him back in his cell and closed the door. Joe sat down on the cot and put his head in his hands. The look on Sturgis’s face haunted him. He thought of Graham. Maybe Sturgis was right. Graham had enemies, maybe someone would have killed him eventually. The rationalization didn’t help. Sturgis could talk himself out of almost any human emotion, but not Joe. By nature, Joe tended to sink into a feeling and get stuck there, sometimes for years.

Joe stretched out on the metal cot, which was bolted to the floor. It must have been close to morning when Joe finally fell asleep. He felt time weigh him down, as if each moment spread out in front of him like two city blocks. He felt trapped in the middle, the previous moment was

the long, empty block behind him and the next moment was the dark, ominous block ahead of him. He was stranded in the present and all alone.

Joe flipped the memory switch in his head and turned on Angelica's music, which always helped him endure time when it slowed down to an excruciating crawl. He noticed a piece of paper folded up on the floor and unfolded it.

'To the blue-eyed man in the third row. I believe I've fallen in love with you. Please come see me after the concert. Angelica Johnson'

Joe read the note many times. It was in her handwriting. He knew it intimately from all the months they spent writing letters to one another before Graham's murder and Joe's isolation. The letter carried the faint scent of Gloria's perfume. Joe couldn't even imagine how she got Angelica's letter to him, or how she got Angelica's letter at all.

All he knew was that he was extremely grateful to her. He closed his eyes and sank into the memory of the concert. With Angelica's music lulling him to sleep inside his head, he clutched her letter close to his heart.

Gloria and Alvin devised a plan to transport Angelica back to Gloria's house. Dr. First hired a private ambulance service and signed Angelica out of the hospital under his care. It was perfectly legal, even though it was a tiny bit devious. They took Angelica out of her room on a gurney under the premise of doing some tests and wheeled her down the hall, past the guard. It was hard to know if one of the nurses or other attendants at the hospital were leaking information to the media. They took a service elevator, then followed the paramedic to the kitchen loading dock where the driver was parked with the ambulance.

They moved Angelica onto a collapsible gurney, then carefully moved her into the back of the ambulance. No one saw them since it was still early, about three-thirty in the morning.

The paramedic went back up to her room with the hospital gurney, but this time it was lined with pillows covered by a sheet. The guard barely noticed him return without Dr. First and Gloria.

Dr. First sat with Angelica in the back of the ambulance. Her vital signs were stable, and she was still asleep from the sedative he had given her. Gloria sat in the back with them while they waited for the paramedic to return, then moved upfront as they drove off into the night. She had arranged with a friend of hers to drive the last lap to her house since she lived in a tight knit neighborhood filled with plenty of gossip mongers. The last thing she wanted to do was arouse suspicion.

They pulled up to a bakery called, Pau Doce, which means sweet bread in Portuguese. Her friend, Joaquin emerged. He was a small Portuguese man with swarthy skin, a full head of wavy black hair, and a gold cap covering his chipped front tooth, which sparkled in the moonlight.

The back of his van was filled with freshly baked bread. The smell was enough to revive anyone. The paramedics moved Angelica in between rows of soft, sweet loaves newly removed from the oven. It smelled like heaven as Gloria and Dr. First climbed into the back part of the van with her, one on either side, surrounded by loose loaves of bread.

“Thank you, Joaquin,” she began. “This is my special friend, Alvin.”

“Ahhh, special friend,” Joaquin repeated as he smiled that golden smile at Dr. First.

Joaquin knew where she lived, which was only a few blocks away.

Gloria took Angelica's hand in one of her hands and reached for Alvin's with the other hand. She motioned to him with her head. He understood and took Angelica's other hand, so they were all connect in a chain in this dark, sweet-smelling seance. Gloria breathed in deeply.

"Alvin," she said, so he copied her.

"Now close your eyes and imagine that her consciousness and her health will rise up, just like this bread has risen up. The bread has something to teach us. Everything and everyone has something to teach us."

They breathed together for a short while.

"I'll tell you what the bread is teaching me," Alvin began.

"What's that?" She asked.

"I'm starving!"

Gloria laughed and reached for a loaf of bread. She smelled it, put it back down, then reached for another loaf. When she found the sweet bread, she opened it and tore off a piece for Alvin. Joaquin made his Pau Doce with a hint of cinnamon, nutmeg, and cardamom. They ate the warm bread and breathed in, together in the darkness, this aromatic moment felt like a little taste of heaven.

Inside Gloria's one-story bungalow in the unassuming Hispanic Pilsen neighborhood on Chicago's lower west side, she busied herself in the cozy and clean kitchen with its atrium window where she grew her exotic herbs and spices. Gloria had very little furniture in her whole house. The kitchen had a small table affixed to the wall with two chairs that tucked underneath and a wall that was lined with copper pots and pans from her home in Argentina, which she left

when she was just a teenager. Her older sister had a job offer in Chicago and brought Gloria with her after their parents both died suddenly of the flu.

Gloria's living room and dining room were essentially in the same big open space that looked out onto the street at the front. Her home had two bedrooms, her larger bedroom with a queen size bed and the smaller bedroom, which had a full size bed where Angelica slept.

Dr. First settled Angelica into the smaller bedroom and hung the I.V. drip above her head like a guardian angel. He set up his supplies next to her bed on the worn antique dresser with everything he needed to read her vital signs. Angelica looked pale and ghostlike next to Gloria's worn, white sheets. Dr. First stood by her bedside, feeling the weight of the responsibility on his shoulders. *What if he couldn't take care of her properly here? What if something happened to her? Did he leave the hospital too soon?*

His self doubt was punctuated by the call of the tea kettle whistling in the kitchen. Gloria took it off the stove and began to hum. She moved about gracefully and knew her home so well, where everything was kept, and how many steps it was to the bedroom.

She arrived in the bedroom with a steaming cup of clove scented tea for Alvin and continued humming as she felt her way to the side of the bed and sat down next to Angelica. It wasn't a tune that he recognized, but one that sounded familiar just the same.

Gloria took Angelica's hand and hummed into her palm. She did the same thing to her other hand and then hummed into her feet. Alvin was startled at first, but didn't interrupt her. The tune was more of a chant than a song.

This woman had magic. He could feel it. He had devoted his life to science and still he knew that without Gloria and her powers, Angelica wouldn't recover in the same way.

Gloria went into the kitchen and came back with some freshly picked herbs. She placed them beside Angelica's bed while Alvin checked her blood pressure, pulse and temperature.

Gloria sat on the opposite side of the bed and stroked Angelica's hair and cheeks. She was pure maternal love and Angelica looked a little more peaceful, at last.

They left Angelica to rest and sat down together at the small kitchen table. Gloria looked tired. Alvin took off her shoes and rubbed her feet as she sipped some hot tea. She sank into the sensation and the warmth.

"You need some sleep," he said. "Doctor's orders!"

Just before the sun came up, Gloria and Alvin settled into their bed and their new life together. She drifted off to sleep dreaming of clouds moving softly above her and the warmth of the sun on her face and body, wrapped up in his arms.

CHAPTER 10

The harsh, florescent lights in Joe's cell never went off and cast no shadows. A blue glow enveloped him, robbing him of any sense of day or night. He was hungry and thirsty and exhausted. He had already taken a pee several times in the corner urinal and the stench permeated the airless room.

Joe took off his shoes and wedged Angelica's letter between the sole of his right shoe and the inside flap. He kept his shoes off and stretched back out on the rickety bed. He took off his black cashmere sweater and rolled it up for a pillow under his head. He had lost his baseball cap somewhere along the way, probably in the squad car or maybe he left it at his seat in the third row. He wondered why they didn't make him change into prison garb and why he still had his electric laughter watch on, but none of his other personal belongings. He took the sleeve of the black sweater and covered his eyes with it, trying to blot out the invasive florescent light.

Angelica's cello rendition of Mozart's Requiem played softly in his head as he tried to coax himself to sleep. He imagined that he was back home in his brownstone and instead of the holograms the real Angelica Johnson played the cello in his living room. He imagined that the real life Angelica washed his body in the shower, sipped wine on his rooftop garden, and made love to him in his own bed.

The dream didn't last long. A burly man dressed in civilian clothes opened the door to his cell and dragged him out shoeless and without his sweater. Joe tried to grab them but the man gave him two swift kicks at various pressure points. The kicks were so fast that he didn't even see them coming. They were so effective that he collapsed to the ground, his legs fell out from

under him and his right hand looked like it belonged to someone else, it was completely immobilized.

The burly guy dragged him to an elevator that took him to the rooftop where a helicopter waited with threatening propellers that made a deafening sound. The burly guy threw Joe in the back of the helicopter, and he landed on the floor. There were no doors, no seats, and nothing to grab onto. He was without a seat or a seatbelt or the use of his right hand to help him hang on. He slid around like a fish out of water in the back of the helicopter as it lifted off the roof and turned sharply.

The windstorm from the helicopter kicked up the gritty soot on the rooftop. Joe squinted to avoid it getting in his eyes. Through the dark, narrow slits, he saw the General for the first time sitting in the pilot's seat. The General had thick, wavy hair as dark as shoe polish and a wide forehead that looked overly tightened and disappeared under metallic glasses.

An unnerving laugh came from the front of the helicopter as the pilot swerved left then right just to jostle Joe around. It was a game to him, and he had the most sadistic laugh that Joe had ever heard.

Joe managed to wedge himself between two gun racks, which helped him not flop around so much. The General turned around and introduced himself.

“So, this is the famous Joe Coyote!” he said, eyeing Joe like a piece of meat. “We’re going to have some fun with you.”

“I didn’t kill Graham Gold,” Joe said.

“I don’t give a fuck if you did!” he said.

“Who are you and where are you taking me?” Joe asked. Big mistake. The General took out a small stun gun from the pocket of his black leather jacket, which was no bigger than a fountain pen.

“I’ll tell you when to talk and when not to talk,” he said.

He gave Joe a jolt to the bottom of his bare left foot. The pain was excruciating. The whole left side of his body felt white hot and paralyzed instantly. He couldn’t even speak.

“Not laughing now, are you Mr. Electric Laughter?”

The General turned back around and took the controls again. The burly guy was sitting in the front seat and let out a phony laugh, trying to suck up to the General who just gave him an intimidating look.

The General looked like he was in his mid-fifties, though his face was virtually wrinkle-free. Joe wondered if he’d had a facelift or just abused Botox, but thought better of asking him. He was in impeccable shape and even with the leather jacket on, Joe could see that he was well built. There was no question he could out bench-press him.

It was almost morning and the autumn air was brisk and the temperature was quite cold this high up in the clouds. Joe wore only his white tee shirt and jeans. He didn’t even have socks on and curled himself up and tried to stay warm but the cold, the exhaustion, and hunger got the best of him. He shivered in the back of the helicopter like a scared puppy for several hours.

They finally landed in an airfield in some warmer climate. Joe had no idea where they were. The sun was hot down here and he was starting to warm up. The General got out of the helicopter and nodded to the burly guy. Joe was still shivering in the back. The bottom of his left

foot had a huge bruise on it from the stun gun. The burly guy dragged Joe to his feet and made him stand in the middle of the field.

Flies buzzed around him as the guy placed a burlap sack over Joe's head, which hung down past his shoulders. The guy leaned in close and talked to him through the sack. Joe couldn't see anything.

"I wouldn't sit down if I was you," he said. He left Joe there for hours.

The burlap sack smelled like dung. The flies swarmed around him and bit him through the sack. He closed his eyes and ducked his head but they still went for his face. He tried wriggling to brush them off because his hands were handcuffed behind his back. Eventually, the constant twitching wore him out and he stopped moving.

Hours passed and it got really hot. Joe was covered in sweat, which made him even more of a magnet for the flies and other insects. At dusk, Joe was still standing, though barely. Before nightfall he collapsed.

There was no telling how long he had been unconscious, hours, days, a week. He woke up in a small infirmary where an I.V. dripped fluids into his veins. He felt woozy and nauseous. His eyes were so swollen from the bites, and he could barely see out the slits that were oozing with puss. He had the taste of vomit in the back of he throat. His left leg twitched involuntarily.

"Are you awake or still faking sleep?" a young man's voice asked him. It wasn't a voice he recognized, but it didn't sound hostile.

"What?" Joe could barely speak. His mouth was equally swollen from the bites.

“Shhh, don’t say anything,” the man said. He couldn’t have been more than twenty. Joe got a look at him through the slivers of his eyes as the guy leaned over him to swab some alcohol on Joe’s bites.

“You lasted a lot longer than any other detainee they brought us so far. We all had bets on how long until you fell. No one gave you more than four hours. You lasted almost eight!” the guy chatted away.

“Yippee,” Joe said in a deadpan voice.

“They’re going to fuck you up,” the guy said. “They do it to everyone. I don’t know if you deserve it or not. Whose to say whether you really helped those terrorists or if it’s just another bullshit story? I’ll tell you what, I could never last,” he said.

“Get me out of here!” Joe begged.

“I can’t,” the guy said. “I’ll give you some advice. If you have somewhere to go in your mind or someplace you can think of where you’ve been really happy, go there and stay there. Pretend you’re not here. It’s the only way to keep a little bit of your spirit or they’ll take it all and crush it. I’ve seen them do it.”

The guy looked nervous and wild-eyed while he talked. Joe had never been so scared in his whole life. He closed his eyes and imagined that he was a hologram. He stood at his favorite spot by the bay window while Angelica played the cello. They were both transparent, ghosts of their former selves, but at least they were together.

The swelling receded and the infected bites got under control eventually. Joe no longer had the chills and the high fevers. For the next few days he was allowed to rest, to eat, and to replenish his body with fluids. His face was still swollen and distorted, though he gained more

vision in his eyes each day. By the end of a week he had enough resilience to get out of bed and go to the bathroom by himself. He never saw the skinny guy again, the one who gave him the warning that first day. Various other officers were assigned to him. It was never the same guy twice.

Once he could walk and keep food down, he was moved to a holding room. It resembled a dug out basement room, it had no windows, and was all cement. There was one bare light bulb just out of his reach on the ceiling. Otherwise, there was nothing in the room. The cement floor was cool and clammy.

Joe was thrown in the cement room and kept there for what felt like an eternity. He had no contact with anyone. His meals were brought to him and slid under the door through a flap that opened about three inches high by twelve inches wide. He couldn't open the flap from the inside.

The light bulb never went off. He had no view of the outside so he never knew if it was day or night. There didn't seem to be any regularity to when they brought his food. Sometimes he was so ravenous and thirsty that it felt like days since he'd eaten. Other times, the food arrived every few hours, or what felt like every few hours. Joe spent most of his time as a hologram in his house with Angelica. The rest of the time, he replayed memories from his life with Graham.

"Dracula?"

"Everyone's Dracula."

"How about a ghost?"

"Use some imagination."

"A dickhead?"

“Now you’re talking,” Graham said with his gloating smile. They were invited to a masquerade ball, some fundraiser that Joe had been invited to and coerced into going to by Graham. It was before the days when Graham looked like Joe and the two men were just friends, best friends. They hadn’t even thought of or discussed the possibility of Graham becoming his public double yet. Graham was still just his personal trainer and nothing more at the time, but they were becoming fast friends, best friends.

“Are we really going to go as dickheads?” Joe asked.

“I don’t actually have to dress up for it,” Graham said.

“No kidding?”

“We could get something that looks like one of the Coneheads, but round it at the top, turn it into a large penis. Then we could fashion something around our ears for the balls,” Graham said.

“I see you’ve really given this some thought.”

“You’ve got a better idea?” Graham asked.

“You know what they say about ‘if the shoe fits,’ or in our case ‘if the dick fits,’” Joe said.

“You’re not a dick, Joe. I’m a dick. You’re a nice guy. I haven’t met a lot of nice guys in my life. You’re my first and favorite nice guy,” Graham said.

“Are you trying to insult me?” Joe asked.

“Not at all!”

They went as dickheads. Joe contacted one of the theater companies and had the costume master fashion headdresses in the shape of phalluses.

“Do you think one of us should be uncircumcised?” Graham asked.

“You can be uncircumcised if you want to. Me, I’m Jewish,” Joe said.

“You’re Jewish! Who would have thought with a name like Coyote,” Graham said.

“My mother was Jewish, so technically and according to the religion, I’m Jewish. My father was an American Indian, hence the name, Coyote. I never really knew him. He died right after I was born. What religion are you?”

“I’m whatever I want to be, always have been,” Graham said.

The night of the masquerade ball, Joe and Graham drove to the Hilton in a limousine with their dickheads sticking out of the skylight. Joe could only imagine how hilarious it must have looked driving down Michigan Avenue.

“Mine’s bigger than yours,” Graham said. “I had her give me a couple more inches. I hope you don’t mind.”

“I noticed yours leans a bit to the left,” Joe said.

“It goes with my technique,” Graham explained.

They wore tuxedos, flesh-colored rubberized masks that clung to their faces and hairy spheres around their ears that hung down from their earlobes to their necks.

“Do you think we should have shaved?” Graham asked.

“Nah! I kind of feel like Princess Leia,” Joe said.

“You realize that everyone will think you are gay.”

“I’m not gay,” Joe said.

“It doesn’t matter. You show up to an AIDS benefit with another guy dressed as a penis, people are going to wonder.”

“This is an AIDS benefit? I thought it was for Children.”

“Pediatric AIDS, you’re right.”

He was right. Why didn’t Joe think of that before?

“Hey, lighten up. It’ll give the media something else to talk about. You know, keep their stories fresh,” he said.

“I don’t want to give the media something else to talk about. I don’t want to encourage them at all. They’ve made my life a living hell,” Joe said.

“Don’t let them. You have to have more fun with them. Treat them as a toy you can bat around like a cat with a ball of string,” Graham said.

“I can tell that you like all this attention. I hate it,” Joe said.

They pulled up to the hotel.

“By the way, tonight my name’s Frank Uzell,” Graham said.

“Frank Uzell? Where did you come up with that?” Joe asked.

“I didn’t want people thinking I was gay! I’ve got a reputation to uphold, believe it or not,” Graham said.

“Too bad, because security’s going to ask for some I.D.,” Joe said.

“Not a problem. I’ve got it covered.” Graham pulled out his wallet from inside the tuxedo jacket and showed Joe a driver’s license, a credit card, and even a library card with the name Francis Uzell on it.

“I prefer the name, Frank. Francis is so feminine. You realize my initials are F.U.!”

“How did you get this?” Joe asked.

“Joe, let me tell you something. There are two worlds in which to live: the world where you live where money buys you most of what you need and want, and the world where I live where you just need to know the right people to get stuff. Luckily for you, I know how to navigate through both worlds.”

They pulled up to the hotel. It took a little maneuvering to get their penises out of the car in tact.

Joe replayed that night and many others from the confines of the cement room years later. God they had fun! Graham lived life with an adventurousness and a boldness that Joe never knew existed. He was charismatic and flamboyant and Joe was in awe of him. Graham turned everyday into an adventure and everything they did together into a memorable experience. Joe had never met anyone like him. In a world where Joe’s friends and colleagues included brilliant scientists and lawyers and politicians, Graham presented him with the chance to have more fun than he could have ever imagined.

Joe pulled out memories just like this and revisited them for hours at a time. It was the only way he could get time to move forward, or backward, he was never sure. He would have lost his mind in the cement block had it not been for his ability to imagine a life with Angelica or to replay his past escapades with Graham.

He slipped in and out of delirium. The food was laced with something, Joe could tell but he devoured it anyway. He was starving and drained from dehydration.

Joe babbled out loud, holding conversations with Graham and Angelica, his dead mother, Dr. First, and a litany of lovers, most of whom he didn’t remember much about. He recited

Angelica's last letter to him so many times that it blurred together into one incomprehensible phrase. His thin grasp on reality had been completely obliterated. He was ready for the next step.

The General himself showed up one day and invited Joe to join him in his study. Joe could barely walk, but followed him as best he could. His knees wobbled so unsteadily it looked like his body was dancing on top of them.

Inside the General's office, Joe was put in a big leather chair that had arms and a high back. The General sat across from him at his desk.

"So, how do you find our humble abode?" he asked Joe.

"Oh the food's great!" Joe answered.

"Glad to hear it," the General said. He had no sense of humor, but he did appreciate Joe's irreverence.

"So you're the big man who invented the Electric Laughter. How does that feel to know you introduced something to the world that has changed it forever?"

"It feels better than standing in an open field being ravaged by killer flies," Joe said.

"I'm sure it does," the General said.

The General flipped a switch underneath his desk and metal straps shot out from the arms and legs of Joe's chair, securing him in a vice like grip. Joe tried not to react, but he was terrified.

The General placed an Electric Laughter watch on Joe's wrist and secured it in place. He had a menacing look on his face.

"The reason you're here, Joe Coyote has nothing to do with you being accused of murdering Graham Gold. When we're through with you here you'll go back to Chicago and stand trial on the state level. But here, we've got Federal fish to fry here, so to speak."

Joe looked up at the General. The two men held one another in such contempt it made the General laugh.

“This is going to be too much fun!” the General said.

“Bring it on!” Joe Coyote said. His boldness would have even impressed Graham, he was sure of it.

“You think you are better than the rest of us, Joe Coyote?” he said leaning so close to Joe’s face that he could smell the cavities rotting in the General’s mouth.

“I do think I’m better than you because I’m a human being,” Joe said.

“Is that why you rewired the Electric Laughter watch and sold it to terrorist organizations?” he asked Joe.

“What are you talking about?” Joe said.

“You heard me. Your little trinket here has changed the face of terrorism.”

“Terrorism? I deal in laughter,” Joe said.

“I don’t care what you deal in, you’ve split the atom and there’s no going back. You uncovered the formula, the DNA of emotions, and now life as we knew it is up for grabs,” he said.

“I’ve got international patents,” Joe said.

“You think having international patents is going to provide you with some kind of protection? Wake up! It doesn’t matter if you personally handed over the equation for Electric Laughter to those guys or if by inventing it you opened a Pandora’s Box. You’re still responsible for giving them the one weapon we will never be able to obliterate no matter how many of them we kill,” he said.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Joe said.

“No? Where have you been for the last five years Joe Coyote? Home dreaming about Angelica Johnson? Give me a break,” the General said.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I was,” Joe said.

“Perhaps it is time to give you a test drive of what your invention has become to some people around the world,” the General said.

He reached over and pressed the button that activated the Electric Laughter watch strapped to Joe’s wrist. Joe held his breath as the microchip calculated his bodily functions. The imperceptible jolt of electricity released, but instead of triggering the synapse for laughter in the brain, it jumpstarted another, completely contrary emotion. The only way Joe could describe it was that it felt like murderous rage.

At first it felt like a high dose of adrenaline mixed with a sexual urge. Then it quickly transformed into an insatiable taste for violence, flavored with rage, hatred, and anger. Instead of releasing a laugh, Joe’s body surged forward involuntarily. If he hadn’t been strapped down, he would have strangled the General, not because he wanted to, but because he *had* to based on the impulse that was released with the jolt. Joe felt an irrepressible urge to kill someone, it didn’t matter who it was.

The impulse lasted only an instant, but in that instant Joe Coyote was changed forever. He wanted to die. The only reason he could think of to live, was to destroy the invention he had put on the earth. It was no longer his invention, but the perversion of his invention. He had paved the way for terrorists and other psychos to unleash the worst part of the human condition. He dropped his head and sobbed.

“Please,” he begged the General. “Don’t do that again.” His voice came out in a whisper.
“I had no idea.”

“What was that?” the General boomed. “You want more? He pressed the button several times in succession. Instead of binge laughing, Joe experienced a binge of the horrific impulse toward murderous rage. His body filled with an acrid energy that felt like an abscess from a tooth had been pumped through his veins. He was consumed with the urge toward violence. The longing to kill was greater than any other emotion in his psyche in those moments.

White hot flashes of light finally filled his vision. Joe longed for the seizure that would take him away from this feeling, this hell.

He convulsed and passed out. When he came to, the General stood over him.

“I’m begging you, please stop. I’ll do whatever you want,” Joe said.

“Glad to see you are ready to cooperate. I want the names and contact information of all the people you encountered during the last five years,” he said.

“I didn’t encounter anyone,” Joe said.

The General looked at him with rage in his eyes, “No, huh? You were totally isolated, didn’t talk to one person for five years? You expect me to believe that?”

He pressed the button several more times and Joe was thrown back into the hell he had just emerged from. His body arched and writhed as the metal straps cut his skin. His back strained to the point of nearly snapping. He vomited blood, ejaculated, defecated and urinated on himself. His head filled with an unstoppable buzzing noise and it vibrated with a headache like he’d never had before. Joe had only one wish and that was to die right then.

“Please just kill me, I’m begging you,” he said to the General.

“That would be too easy,” the General said. “Now, about those people whom you contacted.”

“I ordered groceries and all my home supplies from Amazon, all my clothes and shoes came from Nordstrom’s, and my bras and underwear from Victoria’s Secret. I bought a beer from the same vendor every time at the Cubs game and ordered my tickets from an online broker.”

The General still had no sense of humor. He pressed the button several more times while examining a hangnail on his other hand.

The next thing Joe remembered was waking up on the cement floor. He was covered in his own excrements. He had been reliving the plastic surgery nightmare when he sat next to Graham as the model for his future face, only this time it was his face that was being peeled back. Joe could feel the inside of his cheeks and nose exposed. The cold underside of his flesh crawled with flies.

He woke up and inside his head the buzzing continued along with the vibrating headache. Flashes of light continued to plague him, though he didn’t mind the disruption in the darkness. The light bulb was still on, but Joe had lost the ability to see it.

CHAPTER 11

It was truly a case of the blind leading the dumb. Gloria couldn't see and Angelica couldn't speak, though she was awake and moving about on her own. They were the perfect pair. During the weeks that followed as Angelica recovered in Gloria's house they transformed one another's lives.

Gloria spent most of her time cooking and baking and brewing up potions with her home grown herbs and various other ingredients she sent Alvin out to buy at the local specialty markets. Her home smelled like an exotic restaurant and created a feeling of warmth and healing like no place they'd ever been.

She fed Alvin and Angelica from recipes she learned from her mother and her grandmothers. One of her cabbage stews was fuchsia in color and had a combination of sweet, sour, and spicy that revitalized Angelica's insides.

She mixed various spices into her chocolates giving them a medicinal effect. Her breads rose to fluffy perfection and every piece of meat was infused with flavor that was out of this world. All the maternal energy she had stored up during the nearly seventy years of her life was unleashed in her cooking.

Angelica had spent the first two days unconscious in Gloria's extra bedroom with visions of water swirling around her head. The sound of the music from the concert replayed as if it had been submerged deep in the sea. It was distorted and slow, but she could still make out the melody. The languid colors that accompanied it were murky and dark. In some strange, drawn out dream, Angelica saw herself submerged and desperately trying to surface.

Her hair in the dream had streaks of brown and black and as she swam through thick water she noticed streaks that looked like brown burlap and speckles that flew off like black flies. She kept swimming and swimming and tried to reach the light but always ran out of energy before she could break through. She sank back down to the bottom and had to start all over again.

After a while, the water in her dream became less dense and the heaviness seemed to lighten. The colors were brighter as she neared the surface. She felt revived by strange scents that permeated the dream. Sometimes it was a citrus smell that brought bright orange ribbons into the dark water. Sometimes it was a sugary smell that dropped little petals of pink pearls into the mire. Once it was the smell of pine needles and evergreen berries that spread out like a web of various shades of green that she used to climb up toward the surface of the water.

Soon she was close enough to the dream water's edge that she could see the sky raining rose petals that landed on the surface creating a patterned veil of red and gold where the sunlight sketched through it.

But it was the blue hum that finally pulled her out of the dark dream water. The hum started as a wire thin vibration that pierced through the dark tumultuous water. It reminded Angelica of a beam of light, a little thread of the sky that wound its way like a fishing line to her. As she circled around it in her dark, dreamy, submerged state, the hum became brighter in intensity. Like a fish to food, Angelica swam around the hum and fed off it. At first, she nibbled on it. Then it grew. She aligned her body with the sky blue beam that had grown to about four feet in diameter and slid inside, as if it was a tunnel to the sky. Inside this blue space she was as light as air. The heaviness of the murky water existed outside the blue tunnel. She could reach

out a limb and feel its weight on her arms or legs. But inside this tunnel of light, she could swim and dance and almost fly.

The more time she spent inside the blue hum, the larger it grew and the lighter she felt. Soon, the lightness of the blue humming tunnel transported her to the surface of the water. She first managed to get a hand out of the water, just the tips of her finger, but when she brought them back down, they were pink and fleshy in color unlike the rest of her body that still had a gray tinge to it.

Next she managed to get just the top of her head to break through the plane of the water's edge. By now the blue hum had grown in circumference to eight feet wide in diameter. Angelica could swim inside it, floating effortless without being concerned that her arms and legs would fall prey to the weight of the water just outside her reach. Once the top part of her head emerged up to her ears she was able to propel herself out of the water.

She opened her eyes and saw Gloria. She recognized her immediately as the woman with the red scarf she wore the evening of the concert when she sat next to the baldheaded man. Gloria continued humming, which Angelica recognized as the Blue hum from her submerged state.

Angelica's eyes were open, but Gloria couldn't see them. *This woman is like a red thread tied around my finger*, Angelica thought. Seeing her triggered the concert and Angelica replayed a segment in her mind from the first half. In her mind's eye, she saw the blue-eyed man, there was a hint of red in her peripheral vision.

"A thread of red keeps the evil eye away," Gloria said. She had the uncanny ability to read Angelica's mind.

Angelica nodded. It was the first words Gloria spoke to her since she had arrived. Before that moment, all she did was hum.

Dr. First came into the room at the sound of Gloria speaking to Angelica. Since Angelica still couldn't speak, and since Gloria still couldn't see there was no way to know for sure how Gloria knew Angelica was awake.

"Angelica!" Dr. First said with delight. He quickly took her vital signs and kept hugging her.

"I was so worried about you! Thank God! You're back! Are you hungry?" he asked.

She nodded. Gloria went out and returned a short while later with a steaming bowl of clear broth. Dr. First took it from her and handed it to Angelica. She finished the soup and looked up at them. Dr. First beamed with hope. Gloria sat down on the edge of her bed and hummed to her again.

Angelica looked at her with recognition and so much gratitude that she took Gloria's hand and held it in hers. She couldn't speak, but she could cry. She sobbed into Gloria's hand and Gloria reached over and hugged her. She rocked Angelica in her arms that way she would have done with a small child.

Dr. First was so moved that he cried and then sat down on the bed and hugged them both. At seventy-eight years old, he finally had the family he always dreamed of. They were almost all here, except one of them was still missing.

The days passed with a new rhythm as Angelica got stronger. Gloria assured her that they didn't need to speak to understand one another, just like she didn't need to see to perceive things. Angelica was so grateful for the love and the food and the space to heal. Gloria continued

humming, sometimes to her and sometimes to herself while in the kitchen whipping up one of her medicinal and delicious concoctions.

Once Angelica was out of danger, Dr. First paid a visit to Sturgis Regan. The two men had met on several occasions over the years when he and Joe were still on good terms. The last time they saw one another had been at Joe Coyote's memorial service. It wasn't exactly an intimate affair. Several hundred of the country's "who's who" had shown up. Joe had stipulated in his will that he wanted Dr. First and Sturgis both to speak at his memorial service should he pass away first.

Dr. First put aside the experience that created the falling out between him and Joe and spoke about the time when he first met Joe Coyote as a young neurology resident at his hospital in Zurich, Switzerland.

"We were pioneers in our field of neurology at the Brain Research Institute and when this bright, young man, Joseph Coyote joined our team, we had no way of knowing that we would be following him into the brave new world, this uncharted territory," Dr. First proclaimed.

"Joe had a love of humanity unlike anyone I've ever known. Science for him was a means to unlocking the mysteries of the inner workings of the brain and ultimately, the human condition. I remember standing with him at his beloved mother, Grace Coyote's funeral he turned and said to me, '*What is it about being alive that makes us love so deeply even if the sadness is too much to bear?*'"

"I've reflected on that question so many times over the years. I still don't have the answer. I just have the experience of loving my dear friend, Joe Coyote so deeply that the sadness is too much to bear. Yet, I wouldn't trade in that sadness for anything in the world." Dr.

First broke down and cried on the podium. The crowd at Joe's funeral was silent, many of them sobbing.

When Dr. First heard that Sturgis had assembled the finest lawyers in the country to serve on Joe's defense team, he called him up and offered his assistance. Sturgis was eager have him participate and invited him to the next meeting.

Sturgis Regan's LaSalle Street law firm was the epitome of old money and old school lawyering. The hallway resounded with wealthy clients and top notch interior designers with its muted colors and expensive furniture and artwork. Sturgis himself came out and greeted Dr. First and ushered into the 'war room' as they referred to it. A long, shiny mahogany table stretched out in a large conference room, which comfortably seated a couple of dozen lawyers with their briefcases, laptops, and tight-skirted secretaries bringing them memos and cups of coffee.

Sturgis sat at the head of the table with Dr. First to one side and on his other side sat a bright-eyed, African American woman in her late-thirties with almond-shaped eyes, long, wild hair and an incongruous, conservative business suit. She carried herself with an air of independence and confidence, not like the stuffy lawyers he was used to at law firms like these.

Dr. First leaned over to the woman and introduced himself.

"I'm Doctor Alvin First. I was a mentor and friend to Joe Coyote," he began.

"I know who you are. I'm Patricia Rodgers, you can call me Pat," she said. She instantly charmed Dr. First who noticed the contrast between her multiple ear piercings, brightly colored necklace, and the dark, conservative business suit. She had an easy demeanor that didn't go with the decor as the other lawyers, mostly men, filtered in. The gaggle of dark suits took their respective places at the war room table.

“Let’s get started,” Sturgis said. The room quieted down instantly. Sturgis had complete command over his troop of lawyers and criminologists. He conducted the meeting with authority and finesse. His tactic was to plead not guilty by reason of insanity. There was plenty of evidence to support Joe’s mental instability, starting with his inability to handle the media, which forced him to hire a public double in the first place. There were countless numbers of cases where Joe displayed erratic and inappropriate behavior to the point of being either bi-polar, schizophrenic, or having some other personality disorder as yet to be named. They talked strategy about his mental illness label and which one would be most advantageous. They were storytellers, magnifying the truth and reconfiguring it to fit their needs. Joe was the tragic hero, the man who invented the cure for sadness, but succumbed to it himself. The climax of their story was the incident with Angelica that led to the rift between Joe and his friend, Graham who was also his double, which put Joe over the edge. He was not in his right mind and couldn’t be held accountable for his actions.

Sturgis had plenty of evidence that supported Graham’s unsavory and criminal personality. Pat was the lead criminologist who tried to find Graham after Joe’s alleged murder. She had hired a talented team and they already had a lot of evidence in place.

No one questioned Sturgis’s strategies. He was one of the founding partners at the law firm and was completely revered. The lawyers followed his reasoning and nodded their heads along the way.

Dr. First noticed that only Pat had a couple of moments where she had to bite her tongue at something he had said or advised. Otherwise, Sturgis was their unchallenged guru. Joe was their top client and the one with the most notoriety. He deserved the undivided attention of his

whole team. God knows he could afford it. This was the legal equivalent to winning the Academy Award for the law firm. The publicity alone on this case promised to be plentiful and bring them into a new stratosphere of recognition and reputation.

Dr. First was asked to be the prime authority on Joe's mental health since he was his trusted doctor, former mentor, and a world expert on brain research. Sturgis expounded on Dr. First's long list of impressive credentials and emphasized his longtime friendship with Joe Coyote.

"Actually, I don't have psychiatric credentials. I'm strictly a neurologist," Dr. First said.

An awkward silence followed, which Sturgis finally broke. "And did I forget to mention, he's humble as well." They all chuckled in that obligatory way, all except Pat.

"Really, I don't think I have the right credential and experience to determine his mental wellness," Dr. First insisted.

"Dr. First, I appreciate your integrity and your humility. Let's think of Joe now. He knows you. He trusts you. He'll have a comfort level with you that no one else will have with him. That's worth its weight in gold. With your extensive knowledge of medicine and your intricate understanding of the human brain, I don't think any jury would question your authority. Given your lifelong friendship with Joe Coyote, there is no one else I would entrust with this position. No one else wants to save him as desperately as you and I do," Sturgis said as he got all choked up.

Angelica had a nightmare one night and screamed so loudly that Gloria and Alvin awoke from a very sound sleep. She was almost inconsolable and gasped for air between the sobs. She had dreamt that her Electric Laughter watch was going to kill her. She couldn't get it off her

wrist and every time she pressed the button — or someone else pressed the button — a shock went through her body that drained her life force.

Dr. First arrived in her room and woke her from the dream. He turned on the light and saw that she was covered in sweat. It had been a handful of days since he took out the I.V. and the catheter. It was a good thing because in her sleep she had thrashed around so much that her bed was completely disheveled.

Dr. First tried to comfort her. It was the first sound that came out of her mouth since the coma. She gasped for air and couldn't even cry, she was so distraught.

Gloria arrived and hugged her. She held her close and rocked her and hummed to her. Angelica calmed down enough to formulate words and a sentence. She took Gloria's hand and spoke her first words since the breakdown.

“We have to help him or he'll die,” she said.

“Help who?” Dr. First asked, not knowing how much she knew.

“Joe Coyote,” Angelica answered.

Dr. First had gone to great lengths to try and hide the truth from her until she was ready to hear it. He insisted that they not listen to the news on the radio and instructed Gloria not mention the fact that the man Angelica fell in love with was the real Joe Coyote. Gloria wasn't the slightest bit surprised that she knew.

“We'll help him, I promise you. In ways that no one else can help him,” she reassured Angelica. “We'll work our magic.”

It took a long while and a sleeping pill to calm Angelica down after the nightmare. They returned to bed.

“I don’t understand,” Alvin said to Gloria as they snuggled up close to one another.

“What’s not to understand? You yourself told me that people with Synesthesia tend to have heightened psychic abilities. Being blind is the same kind of thing. When one of your senses is altered, the other ones take over. Let me guide her through it,” Gloria said.

“I’m worried about her, that’s all. She could end up in a place she can’t get back from,” he said.

“Or she could end up stuck in the same spot for the rest of her life,” Gloria said.

“There’s really no point in arguing with you, is there?” he asked.

“You see, you do have a little ESP too,” she said.

The next day Dr. First left town. Even though he was retired he still had speaking engagements across the country to attend to and couldn’t afford to cancel them. Gloria encouraged him to go and was eager to get to work with Angelica on her own. The timing was perfect. It wasn’t that she didn’t want Alvin around, she did. He didn’t understand the process and she didn’t want him to impede it. They had a lot of work to do.

“Angelica, you already have strong psychic abilities. You know things before they happen. You connect to people on an energetic level, you draw the right people to you at the right time, and you can access information that the average person can’t get to. I imagine that what overwhelms you about your Synesthesia is not just the sight and sound fusion, but the psychic door that’s been open your whole life. Information and sensations accost you. Your psychic ability is powerful and unbridled and it runs away from you at times. Your Synesthesia enhances your experiences, and your psychic ability makes everything just too intense. You probably have

sensations and psychic visions that you don't even know where they're coming from. It's got to be exhausting,

When Gloria explained it, her experiences made perfect sense to Angelica.

"What do I do about it?" She asked.

"You learn to channel it, recognize it, and learn how to use it to help your friend, Joe Coyote."

"How do you know I have it?" Angelica asked.

"Because of the blue hum of sky that I visualized for you," Gloria said.

"That could have been your psychic energy, not mine. Your energy could have been powerful enough to affect me."

"I'll tell you how. Just before you went over to see Joe Coyote that day, when it wasn't really Joe," she began.

Angelica felt uncomfortable. "What about that day?"

"You had a premonition but you didn't know it was a premonition. Something in you told you that you *had* to see Joe Coyote that day. You *had* to make love to him and you were so intense about it that you couldn't even speak to him beforehand. Something was driving you to fly to another country. It wasn't the longing to finally connect with him. You had handled that longing for months without acting on it. What happened to you was that you got a premonition about Joe's death, or his alleged death as it turns out, and you didn't know it at the time, but the window of opportunity to connect with him in person was about to close. What drove you to his penthouse in Chicago on a whim was the knowledge in some part of your psyche that he was going to be murdered soon after."

“You’re absolutely right.” Angelica whispered. “I never realized it until now.”

“I’m going to try to help you get in touch with that power so you can focus it and use it instead of having it run your life blindly.”

“How do you know all of this? How did you come into my life when I needed you more than I could have ever imagined?”

“Because I have it too,” Gloria said.

The two women spent the rest of the day doing some simple exercises to hone Angelica’s psychic skills. Gloria helped her read her thoughts by sensing the vibration in her hands. She shared some techniques with her that her mother and grandmothers had given her, ways that helped her get around in the physical world. They didn’t do it just because she was blind. They did it because she had the gift. Angelica had the gift too and was already a participant in the energetic, psychic world with her cello playing and her Synesthesia.

Angelica conjured the energy of her deceased mother. She didn’t actually see her, but she caught a faint, yet distinct whiff of her mother’s hair. There were times when Angelica doubted Gloria’s methods, but she followed her instructions closely.

“I don’t think this is working,” Angelica said after a couple of days. She had slipped into a melancholy mood that was so low she didn’t even feel like playing the cello. This struck Angelica as extremely odd, since in the last five years, she had had a voracious appetite for her music, more than ever.

“Think of a ledge,” Gloria said. “Maybe it’s the ledge of a building or a ledge to a plateau on a mountain side. You’ll be in the shadows until you reach up and pull yourself up on this

ledge. Up on the ledge there's a certain kind of sunlight. Absorb that light so it shines from inside of you, instead of just over you."

The next few days after the nightmare, Angelica had lost her appetite. Gloria tried everything, spices, sweets, stews, potions, but nothing picked up her desire to eat.

"I'm having trouble tasting and smelling things," she admitted to Gloria.

There was only one thing left to do. They went downtown to the Symphony Center so Angelica could sit in the seat that Joe Coyote sat in during her performance. It was one of the ways she could tap into Joe's energy.

"But he's not here anymore," Angelica pointed out.

"It doesn't matter. He left a lot of his energy and his heart in this auditorium. I know because I was sitting right next to him."

"Then why don't you sit in his chair and pull out his psychic energy?" she asked.

"Because he's tied to you, he's in love with you. I'm an old woman and you're the great love of his life. Which one of us do you think is ultimately going to get closer to him?"

Angelica had to admit she had a point.

It was more upsetting to Angelica to return to the Symphony Center than she had anticipated. She wasn't used to seeing the stage from this angle. Walking into the auditorium and seeing all those empty seats brought back the vantage point of all those people who had watched her collapse on stage.

"I think we should go," Angelica said.

"I think we should stay," Gloria said.

"This is very difficult for me," she said.

“I’m sure it is and I have so much compassion for you. Wherever Joe Coyote is, I’ll bet things are very difficult for him too,” Gloria said.

Gloria showed Angelica to his seat. She instructed her to sit quietly with her palms resting on the edge of the arms. She walked her through a meditation that involved opening up a beam of light, climbing up on a ledge, and visualizing herself being bathed in psychic energy.

They sat quietly for a long time. Gloria could feel Angelica’s determination. Maybe she’s trying too hard, Gloria thought.

“I’m not trying too hard,” Angelica said.

Gloria held back a little laugh.

“It’s not funny!” Angelica said.

“I’m going to leave you alone in here. I think I’m distracting you,” Gloria said.

Angelica let her memory unfold from that night. Instead of remembering the performance from her point of view, she heard the cello music and watched herself play from Joe’s point of view. She felt the gold mist that she saw surrounding his body when they fell in love during her concert. It had a tingly, effervescent quality and made her feel giddy.

She wanted to cry. No one knew where he was taken to when he left the police station, not even Sturgis. At least he was alive, she could feel it on some level of her consciousness.

Then a really strange image crossed her inner vision. She saw dogs in a cage. Dogs that were left to either be adopted from the shelter or euthanized. The dogs yelped from their cages. Some had barks that were desperate or angry or frightened. The sounds that shot out of their mouths were fierce grays and putrid green colors, like flying dog vomit.

She almost opened her eyes but her attention immediately went to a weird looking woman in a black dress wearing pearls and high heels. The woman sat on the cement floor next to one of the cages and rubbed the dog's stomach. The dog looked like a mangy mutt and had only three legs. The dog licked the woman's hand and nuzzled its face against her knee. The dog's sad bark turned into a lovely whimper. The weird looking woman gave the dog an energy that was pure compassion.

The image disturbed Angelica as much as it touched her. Why would an ugly, middle-aged woman in a beautiful dress sit on the dog-pissed floor of the pound stroking the infested fur of a forgotten dog? Who was this woman?

She opened her eyes and left the auditorium.

"Well?" Gloria asked.

"Nothing. But whoever sat there after Joe needs better-fitting shoes and likes dogs," Angelica said.

CHAPTER 12

Sturgis called Dr. First with the good news, Joe Coyote was returning home to stand trial. He still couldn't explain and claimed he didn't know where Joe had been these past two weeks because it had to do with matters of national security, or so they said. Sturgis told him he doubted that any of them would ever really know what went on during these past two weeks.

"He's a neurologist and an inventor! What could the government possibly want with him?" Dr. First asked. He was outraged.

"When you're as rich as Joe Coyote is, you're a high profile guy whether you like it or not. And in this country, the wealthy are often not the most honest people. I guess they felt they couldn't take chances," he said. "I honestly don't know."

"Take chances, with Joe?" Dr. First couldn't believe that Sturgis would actually think his unexplained incarceration was acceptable.

Dr. First asked to see Joe as soon as possible. He convinced Sturgis that it was in his best interest to let him examine him immediately. If any of Angelica's nightmares had even a glimmer of the truth, Joe was in bad shape.

Sturgis seemed preoccupied with the mechanics and the strategies of the case rather than on Joe's well being. Perhaps that's his way of winning the case so he could keep Joe out of jail for the rest of his natural life.

The night before Joe was scheduled to return, Dr. First and Angelica heard about it on the radio. It was all over the airwaves that Joe would be charged with Graham Gold's murder as soon as the federal government released him from questioning. No federal charges were being filed at this time.

Dr. First observed Angelica closely for her reaction. She seemed no more agitated about him than usual. When he asked her about the psychic training she just shrugged.

“I feel as if I’ve lost my connection to him. I can’t explain it really. Maybe I’m just scared or tired,” Angelica said.

Gloria frowned as she busied herself in the office area adjacent to the kitchen where she worked on her computer and typed in the translations. Dr. First noticed her reaction but didn’t say anything. He wasn’t sure Angelica was ready to be delving into the world of the supernatural so soon after her last breakdown.

The news broadcast reported his return to the Daley Center at noon the following day. Just making that announcement was tantamount to inviting the media frenzy and every celebrity-crazed fan. It was a nightmare waiting to happen.

The morning of his return, Sturgis invited Dr. First to speak at the press conference he was holding to kick off Joe’s trial.

“He’s not running for public office,” Dr. First said. He was more than a bit disturbed at Sturgis’s behavior.

“It is part of the strategy. The best chance we have of getting him off is to create enough public sympathy and awareness so that by the time the jury goes to deliberation, they’re so over indoctrinated with his case that they won’t be able to distinguish between reality and the media’s version of reality. We just need to feed the media. It is a classic strategy that works. Think back to the O.J. trial,” Sturgis said. “This is a celebrity case, not just a criminal case.”

Dr. First arrived several hours before the press conference the next day. The Daley center was already teeming with people and camera crews. The streets were blocked off. Every

television channel showed up, every newspaper, and every reporter across the country wanted a piece of Joe Coyote. The mayor and the city officials encouraged the media circus because it brought international attention to the city. A rock-concert sized crowd of fanatics had camped out on the sidewalk overnight with the hope of catching a glimpse of the inimitable Joe Coyote.

Dr. First called Sturgis from the cab. He was afraid to get out and fight the mob by himself. Sturgis sent a team of security personnel to escort him to the podium where the press conference was to be held. There was a tent behind with armed security guards.

Dr. First arrived as Sturgis was conferring with an image consultant, a slick looking guy of about forty with greasy black hair and an unidentifiable accent. When Dr. First asked the image consultant where he was from he answered, "Europe."

"Where in Europe?"

Dr. First grew up in Switzerland and had lived all over the continent. He still couldn't place the accent. The image consultant gave him a vague answer. Dr. First detected a slight southern twang or perhaps a speech impediment.

Next a flounce-y looking makeup artist tried to get Dr. First to put on a little lip-gloss before the press conference.

"It'll really enhance your look," she said as she brushed on some powder to Sturgis's cheeks. He brushed her away.

"I don't need a good look today," Dr. First said smugly.

"Don't worry about it," Sturgis said. "I was nervous before some of my first big press conferences with Joe. You get used to it."

"I'm not nervous. I'm furious. This is a circus."

Dr. First left the tent. He was so infuriated that he couldn't spend one more moment participating in this charade. He understood even more clearly why Joe needed to hire a public double.

Angelica couldn't bring herself to watch Joe's return. Instead she asked Gloria to teach her how to bake bread. She figured the kneading would help her release some of her frustration and the smell would surely soothe her. She hadn't been able to use her Electric Laughter watch since the nightmares began.

Joe remained in his cement box for several days after the last episode with the General. He attempted to replay Angelica's cello music in his head, but the constant buzzing left over from their last session disrupted her playing. His head vibrated and his vision came in and out of focus. By the third day he still hadn't touched the food they left for him under the door. He was sure it was poisoned.

The General ordered him moved to the infirmary where he was strapped down, sedated, and given intravenous fluids and a stomach tube to feed him. After a few more days his body showed signs of improvement, but his spirit was still shattered.

The skinny guy who he saw the first night after the episode with the fly bites appeared before Joe. He was so sedated that he couldn't tell if it was a dream or if the guy was really there.

"I told you to go someplace in your imagination where they couldn't find you," he said. "Go there now if you can," he said and then he disappeared.

In his worn out mind, Joe stood by the curved bay window in his brownstone. The late afternoon sun shined right through the transparent hologram of his body. This is what it must be like to be a ghost, he thought. His body didn't even cast the slightest shadow.

He went to the window hoping to see Angelica, but he didn't find her. Her hologram was missing. Instead, he looked out and watched Red score the winning goal on the soccer field across the street. Red turned and waited for Joe to acknowledge his victory. Their eyes met and they connected. They both raised their hands above their heads at the same time. It was a simple gesture and one that Joe played over and over again in his weakening mind.

By the end of the second week of his federal investigation at some remote, undisclosed location, Joe Coyote was released into the custody of the General. He was going to accompany him back to Chicago where Joe would stand trial for a murder that he didn't commit.

Joe showered, shaved, dressed in a suit that was provided for him and boarded a private plane bound for home. The General sat across the aisle from him. Two sturdy guards were assigned to accompany them. They left Joe alone on the plane and let him sit by himself. He hadn't uttered a single word since he left the cement womb several days earlier.

Again, he tried to turn on Angelica's music inside his head. He knew every piece she ever played by heart. All he heard was the buzzing that originated in his right ear and the incessant hum of the private jet.

The General chatted with the guards. They ate and drank and played poker during the plane ride back to Chicago. The General wore a gloater's grin and spoke in an overly exaggerated voice. Joe looked out the window and avoided making eye contact with any of them.

Joe caught a glimpse of his own face in the reflection of the window. He didn't even recognize himself right away. His eyes were vacant and lifeless. His face looked gaunt and suddenly very old. His skin had a weathered quality that bothered Joe the most. All that moisturizing was in vain, he half heartedly joked with himself.

The plane landed at a private airstrip. The General took Joe by the arm and forcefully lead him to a limousine that waited just off the runway. As they got in the car, the General quickly strapped on the Electric Laughter watch from their last session. He smiled at Joe.

Joe struggled to get it off, but couldn't remove it. "Please. I will pay you any amount of money. Just take it off," Joe pleaded.

"Nice try, rich guy," the General said.

The limo pulled away with the guards in the front seat and Joe and the General alone in the backseat. The General buckled himself in with the seat belt.

Joe pressed the button across from the window and waited for the murderous rage to hit him. He would have gladly killed the General for crushing his soul so completely, but nothing happened.

The General just laughed. "We really are having too much fun. No wonder why you named it Electric Laughter," he said.

Joe pressed the button again. Still nothing.

"It only works on a remote control and I'm the only one who has it. You think I'm going to unleash you in the car with just the two of us and ruin the element of surprise?"

As Joe deliberated whether or not to lunge for the General and try to kill him anyway, he realized he just didn't have enough killer instinct in him naturally. To play it safe, the General took out the pen-sized stun gun he used on Joe's foot that first day in the helicopter and placed it against the top of Joe's spine.

"A simple click of my pen and you're a quadriplegic," he said matter-of-factly. Joe didn't move the rest of the ride to the Daley Center.

When the limo pulled up to the Daley Center, armed guards stood by the door before they opened it. The two guards from the plane got out of the front seat of the limo and came around to the back passenger side door. The General opened the door. The Guards held Joe securely by each arm. As Joe stepped out of the limo and into the limelight, the General activated the Electric Laughter watch that Joe had strapped to him.

It didn't take more than a second to jumpstart his body with the impulse for murderous rage. He lunged for the nearest reporter with a crazed and maniacal look on his face. Cameras flashed, people screamed, and the General giggled as he closed the limousine door. The mad man, Joe Coyote had returned home.

Once the wave of rage passed, Joe collapsed in sobs on the ground. He was the epitome of a broken man, so mentally unstable that he could have been committed to an asylum for life right then and there and no one would have thought it inappropriate. Sturgis's case could have been won on the merits of his behavior in those two minutes alone.

Joe curled up in a fetal position while the reporters swarmed around him like locusts. He had to be carried inside by the Guards. The cameras flashed so incessantly that Joe thought he was having another seizure. He closed his eyes and actually welcomed the idea of it, anything to escape the crowds and the time bomb around his wrist.

He begged them to put him back in a cell, anywhere that he could be alone and away from the crowd. Sturgis came to see him in the secluded room he was being held in.

"I can't go out there," he said to Sturgis. "You don't know what they did to me at that place."

“You’re probably just in shock from the over-stimulation. Spending five years in total isolation and then having to face a crowd like that one can’t be easy,” he said.

“It’s not the crowd. You don’t understand. It was the General, his men. They killed me,” Joe said.

“You look like you’re still alive to me, Joe,” Sturgis said.

“Physically I’m still here, but they killed me inside. They broke my spirit. It’s this watch. Take it off! Take it off!” Joe screamed frantically. “He could press the button from the remote control and I’d have to kill you. I wouldn’t mean it. I’d just kill you because it made me,” Joe said.

Then he broke down in sobs again. “I didn’t make Electric Laughter to do this, I swear to God!”

Two prison guards rushed in. They had been monitoring him through a hidden video camera and arrived with a medic who quickly sedated Joe. Sturgis looked sufficiently shaken up. He glanced up at the corner where the camera was and nodded his thanks. As they got Joe Coyote under control, Sturgis went to face the press.

They brought Joe to a medical station once the sedation had taken effect. Dr. First insisted on seeing him. It was the first time the two of them had been together since the day Joe delivered Angelica’s Electric Laughter watch to him almost seven years ago. Dr. First had seen Graham-as-Joe since then, unbeknownst to Joe. Since Graham behaved so poorly to Dr. First, their rift created the emotional distance that was never resolved before the murder.

Joe was groggy and doped up by the time Dr. First arrived. He looked thin and unwell, his eyes so glazed over they looked vacant or psychotic. Dr. First felt completely disheartened.

“I’m so glad it’s you. Take the watch off my wrist, carefully. It’s reprogrammed for murderous rage. They found it on the emotional DNA chain,” Joe said as his voice trailed off. He handed his wrist to Dr. First.

“It’s on a remote control, even the lock,” Joe said.

Joe’s pulse felt weak and his skin was unnaturally cool. Dr. First unfastened the Electric Laughter watch from Joe’s wrist with ease.

“It’s off,” he said.

Joe rubbed his wrist and sobbed. He had truly become a shell of the man he once was.

“They crushed me. I wasn’t like this at her concert,” Joe slurred his words he was so drugged from the sedative.

“Rest now, Joe. I’ll be here when you wake up. I missed you,” Dr. First said and he kissed Joe on the forehead.

“How is she?” Joe asked through the thin veil of his consciousness. Joe passed out before Dr. First could answer him.

When Dr. First arrived back at Gloria’s home, Angelica had her cello nestled between her knees and played it for the first time since her collapse. She leaned her cheek against the neck of the instrument as if greeting an old friend.

She stopped playing when she saw Dr. First’s expression.

“He’s lost, isn’t he?” she asked him.

“He’s in really bad shape,” he said.

“Then let’s bring him back,” she said and reached over to the tape recorder that Gloria used while she worked on the translations.

As Angelica played her cello she saw Waves of color fill the room. The deep blues and purples stayed close to the floor while the bright reds and yellows skipped cross the room at eye level. Her playing was smooth and steady, dramatic and rising in passion. She put her heart and her soul into the recording and soon her colors splashed around the room with power and purpose. She wanted to bring Joe a celebration of life, to fill his head with colors that refused to die even after they stopped vibrating. If she could just connect with him again, from her heart to his heart, from her soul to his soul, from the strings of her cello to the gold mist she saw seeping through the pores of the blue-eyed man in the third row. She could help him find himself again, she could feel it. She had to believe it.

While Joe sank into a dreamless, drug-induced sleep and Angelica played with all her might, Pat watched the tape of his arrival over and over again from her studio apartment in the South Loop. She wasn't as interested in the moments when Joe lunged at the reporter. What impressed her most was the aftermath, the great remorse and sadness that caused him to collapse. He didn't strike her as having a criminal disposition. A true psychopath by nature would have been calmer, unmoved by his recent behavior, maybe even triumphant. This man was clearly in great pain. It wasn't his nature to destroy. *Something was destroying him.*

She reviewed her files regarding the Graham Gold case. It all looked like a wild goose chase now that she knew that it was Graham who was dead instead of Joe. With her high-octane education in criminology, law, and psychology why did she not see that she had been chasing a phantom all these years? She didn't even examine the possibility that it could have been Graham who was killed, instead of Joe.

Had she let her ego get in the way? Was she more interested in being the one to find Joe Coyote's killer than she was in discovering the truth?

She tried to convince herself that she was handsomely paid for her efforts, so it wasn't a waste of her time. However, if she started to weigh her life and her accomplishments in terms of money, her life would never amount to anything she could be proud of. It wasn't even a consolation that maybe she could use some of her findings from the investigation to strengthen Joe's case because in her heart, she knew that declaring this man insane to keep him out of life in prison would never bring him freedom or happiness. No justice would ever be served.

At the center of a darkened, chaotic dream Joe kept returning to an image of Red as a five-year old little boy eating sand from the sandbox while Joe watched from his perch at the second story bay window across the street. Joe tasted the grittiness of the sand between his teeth as his jaw clenched while he slept. Red wiped sand from his tongue and cried to his mother who sat close by. She came and wiped the sand from his tongue.

In the rest of the dream, images hurled by him: Graham's face being peeled back during surgery, his dead mother decaying in her grave, Angelica making love to Graham who laughed inside Joe's face, Sturgis standing behind Joe in the bathroom of the Symphony Center, the African American paramedic saying, 'Goodbye, Joe,' and the evil General laughing his sardonic laugh behind mirrored sunglasses in the pilot's seat of the helicopter.

Joe woke up in a sweat. He checked his wrist. The watch was gone, only the bruises remained. He didn't know where he was at first. He felt around for an alarm clock, trying to shut off the buzzing that continued in his head.

He sat up and remembered. He turned up the volume of Angelica's cello music in his head, but the buzzing distorted her playing. Instead, he searched his memory for images of Red. The thought of Red calmed Joe down slightly, so he replayed all the ones he could easily find: Red as a small child swinging on the swings and then jumping off at the top of the arc, chasing butterflies, trading baseball cards, playing soccer with the big kids, shooting hoops until dark, sharing his Halloween candy with a homeless guy, and running across the open field with arms open, pretending he could fly. Red seemed to grow inches with each step. The passing of time during those years was only measurable to him when he thought about watching the neighborhood kids grow up, especially Red.

Joe recalled a conversation he had with Graham once just after the plastic surgery when they were still getting used to the arrangement. In the early days after Graham became Joe's public double, it used to freak Joe out to be in the same room with him, even if one of them was wearing a disguise.

Instead, they had a private phone just for the two of them and spoke incessantly throughout the day. They knew everything about one another. They had to because of their arrangement. At least that's how Joe rationalized it. They became addicted to knowing what the other one was doing. It was fun and also damaging in a narcissistic, co-dependent way, but Joe loved it all the same. It was an indulgence for both of them and reminded Joe of those newly in love couples who couldn't get enough of each other. They talked about everything.

"You ever thought about having children?" Joe asked Graham. It was a sunny afternoon in the late spring and Joe planted tiny tomato plants on the terrace of the other condo they lived

in. Since Graham was masquerading as Joe that day, he stayed in their lavish penthouse on Lake Shore Drive.

When Joe was “off duty,” he stayed in the modestly furnished, three-bedroom condo on the river. Joe actually preferred the modest living space to the garish one. He felt more at home.

They still lived close enough to one another to make a switch at a moment’s notice, but the neighborhoods were really different. Joe rarely ventured out when he wasn’t himself. He hated having to wear a prosthetic nose or a ridiculous chin. It took too much time and he had nowhere that he absolutely had to go except the Cubs game or the occasional rock concert.

“Don’t tell me we’ve got another paternity suit on our hands,” Graham said.

“God I hope not. You told me you were going to use condoms,” Joe said as he patted the wet earth with his bare hands. The mud felt goopy and warm surrounding the fragile tomato plants.

“I do use condoms. You think I want to get some deadly disease, like fatherhood?” he said.

“You could always have them sign a paternity release before you sleep with them,” Joe suggested.

“That’s a great idea,” Graham said. “Except for most of them can’t read.”

“What does Olga have to say about all your sexual escapades?” Joe asked.

“She knows I love her,” Graham said.

“She doesn’t mind you sleeping with the entire neighborhood?”

“I told her that it is part of the job. One of us has to keep up the Playboy image and it’s sure not going to be you. What’s wrong with you these days?” Graham asked.

“Nothing. I’m just a little distracted.”

“A little distracted! You’ve had your head in the clouds since Switzerland. Did you fall in love,” Graham asked.

“I’ve been thinking about having a child,” Joe said.

“Now that much surgery I’m not going to have,” Graham said. “I’ve got to draw the line somewhere.”

“I just think it would be great to have a kid someday,” Joe said.

“Let me guess, someone who looks just like you,” Graham said. “What do you need a kid for when you’ve got me?”

“Haven’t you ever talked about having kids with Olga?” Joe asked.

“Considering we only spent a handful of weeks together during our married life, I’d say it’s a little too soon to get into it.”

“Doesn’t she want kids?” Joe asked.

“Probably. I’m going to suggest that we start small, like with an ant farm or something,” Graham said.

“An ant farm?”

“Yeah, you know. Get used to taking care of something together, then we’ll work up to having a kid someday.”

“You’re a dickhead.”

“So are you going to tell me about her?” Graham asked.

“Who? Angelica?”

“Who else!”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you going to see her again?” Graham pressed the issue.

“I can’t. I don’t ever want her to know about our arrangement. She wouldn’t understand. I don’t understand when I look at it through her eyes.”

The thought haunted Joe. For the first time since Angelica came into his life, he saw his life differently. He wanted to spend his life with someone, have a family, grow old together. He had always been running from his life since he became too famous. Now he wanted his life back, his old life and didn’t know where to find it.

“We could figure something out so she’d never know.” Graham suggested.

“I’d know that I was full of shit.”

Joe shuddered when he thought about Angelica watching his outburst on the ten o’clock news. He wanted to protect her from this unsavory side of him, from the broken man the General returned to the world. *How would she ever love him if she saw him like this?*

It was still dark in his cell. Joe felt cold, not physically chilled as much as unprotected and vulnerable. He wished he had his black cashmere sweater, which he lost just before he lost himself. The prison uniform had no texture to it and the blanket they gave him was rough and scratchy.

He tried to go back to sleep but he couldn’t find a comfortable position for his weary body. His skin felt prickly and he was so exhausted that his limbs weighted him down so much he could barely move them. He stared at the ceiling and thought about his brownstone hideout. They’re going to discover where he’d been living and word would get out about the holograms.

God I’m nuts! He thought.

He missed the Angelica hologram in the black lace nightgown, the one he'd turn on when he got into bed at night so he could fall asleep looking at her face. He thought about conjuring her in his imagination, but just the thought of it freaked him out. He didn't want her anywhere near this place. It was too undignified, even if she'd only appear in his mind.

In the morning, two police officers escorted him to a small room where he was fed a hot breakfast of oatmeal, hash browns and coffee. It looked like a lounge because it had couches, a television, and a coffee vending machine in it. The two officers stayed with him.

"Do you mind?" Joe asked, nodding toward the television. One of the officers obliged him.

His lunatic image jumped out at him on CNN as he watched the coverage from his homecoming the day before. Joe saw the reporter's terrified face as he attacked him. The guards were all over him like pit bulls. He dropped to his knees and wept. Watching this episode unnerved him to no end, but he didn't let on.

"Sugar, please," he said to one of the officers, breaking the awkward silence that surrounded them.

While one passed him the sugar, the other one changed the channel.

"Can I ask you a candid question about that broadcast?" Joe asked. "Did I look fat? You know how sometimes the camera makes you look a little chubby."

The police officers looked stunned. Joe winked at them to let them know he was kidding around.

After breakfast he showered and changed into clean prison garb. He was kept sequestered from the other prisoners because of who he was, a recluse billionaire. They treated him more like

a guest than an inmate. The insanity plea had been leaked to the media and Sturgis was playing it up as much as possible. Eerie trepidation followed him wherever he went. Except for the fact that he couldn't go anywhere, which wasn't too unfamiliar of a feeling for him, he had a pretty good set up compared to his interrogation vacation with the General. He ate, slept, and was allowed to see special visitors with permission. He asked to see Dr. First again.

Joe thought back to the last time the two of them saw one another, when Joe delivered Angelica's watch to Dr. First in Switzerland.

Joe flew back over to Switzerland in his private jet to personally deliver the Electric Laughter watch to Angelica. It was January and a snowstorm carelessly tossed him about the sky and delayed his arrival almost eighteen hours. He checked into a quaint hotel in the historic section of Zug, a medieval town with clay-tiled roofs that looked blood red in the moonlight. He always avoided the newer, glitzier part of town where the wealthy people of the world were known to sequester their money.

Joe only had twenty-four hours until he had to be back in Chicago for a talk that only he could give. He was scheduled to appear at the dedication of a new children's cancer wing at one of the hospitals and he couldn't risk giving the job to Graham who knew nothing about science. The wing was being dedicated to his mother. He also didn't want to risk being seen in two different places, especially when one of those places was on a different continent.

Joe slept soundly for a few hours under the soft armor of a twelve-inch goose-down comforter. His head was spinning, which was either from the plane ride or from the fact that he was going to see Angelica Johnson again. He awoke the next morning with puffy eyes, swollen tight from an allergic reaction to the feathers in the down comforter.

He arrived at the small meeting room he had reserved at the hotel for the three of them to have a private breakfast. He felt nervous and a bit woozy from the antihistamine he took to alleviate the allergy symptoms. The dining area of the room had a view of the lake that settled like a shiny coin in front of the foothills of the Alps. Dr. First arrived alone.

“Will she be joining us shortly?” Joe asked.

“I’m afraid not. She got snowed in and couldn’t get out of Vienna,” Dr. First said. Joe tried to conceal his disappointment.

“Well, send her my best. It is so good to see you, Alvin. How are things?” Joe asked, but Dr. First knew him well enough to see right through the veil of his smile.

“She’s still very fragile and wanted to be here to thank you in person, but I advised against it.”

“You advised against it,” Joe repeated, keeping his anger at bay.

“She can’t afford a set back. Really, Joe if I thought she could have handled it, I would have brought her with me.”

“I understand,” Joe said and motioned for a waiter and breakfast was served. They ate most of their breakfast in silence. Joe was still too disappointed to talk.

“We really do appreciate you taking the time to reprogram the Electric Laughter watch just for her,” Dr. First said.

“It’s my pleasure,” Joe said.

“It could help her regain control of her life, perhaps save her life,” he said.

“Let’s hope,” Joe said as he took out a black velvet jewelry box from inside his suit pocket. He opened it and showed Dr. First the Electric Laughter watch nestled on the lavender

satin inside. The watch had been altered inside and out. A circle of diamonds glimmered around the face. It was rare and exquisite, the way Joe thought of Angelica.

“I hope she likes it,” Joe said.

“Joe, it’s beautiful! She’ll be delighted. You didn’t need to go to such great lengths,” Dr. First said.

“Again, it’s my pleasure,” Joe said.

Dr. First took out a gift from Angelica from his briefcase. It was a CD of her cello music that she recorded just for Joe. The accompanying letter thanked him and asked him to stay in touch with her. The tone of her letter was personal, gracious, and warm. Joe felt instantly connected to her. It was the beginning of their true courtship.

They spent the next year communicating through phone calls and emails and letters and packages that they sent to one another. Joe revealed his feelings for her, but painted a picture that was disturbing. He spoke about his life and the invasion of privacy that caused him to become somewhat of a recluse. She read the papers and saw the countless women that he was photographed with at various events. Most of those photos were of Graham posing as him. She didn’t doubt his feelings for her and she believed him when he told her that she’d hate his life. She understood that he hated his life. So she waited until the glitz and glamor wore off. She never would have survived the constant social demands and the barrage of the media.

When Dr. First arrived to see him again in prison, he was conscious but still unglued. Joe cried on the spot when he saw him again. It took Joe several long moments to stop crying as he hugged his old friend. Joe finally looked up and saw that Dr. First’s eyes were also wet with tears.

“Before I examine you, tell me, how are you, *really?*” Dr. First asked.

“I don’t know. I’m still alive, aren’t I? That’s something of a miracle,” Joe said.

“Indeed,” Dr. First said.

They spent the better part of the morning together. Dr. First finished his examination within the first half an hour and discovered an infection in Joe’s right ear along with some damage to the eardrum. He prescribed an oral antibiotic and drops. The rest of his ailments weren’t as easy to treat.

Joe confided everything to Dr. First, from his paranoia and depression during his reclusive days, to the nightmares, the obsession with Angelica and every detail of his experience with the General.

“I usually know when I’m being paranoid. Not while I’m being paranoid, but afterward. I can stand back and look at myself in a mirror and assess the situation. I’m telling you, that murderous rage Electric Laughter watch wasn’t in my imagination. *It was real.* He triggered it with a remote control and could even lock it so I couldn’t get it off my wrist. That’s why I acted like a crazy person when I got out of the car when they brought me back after the federal investigation. He zapped me with it just as I stepped out of the vehicle. It’s my worst nightmare,” Joe said.

Joe talked for nearly three hours. Even though he was exhausted he couldn’t stop himself. The confession made him feel purged, cleansed, but drained. Dr. First listened attentively, made some notes, and at times had to stop Joe so he could hug him. The two of them renewed their friendship, but deeper this time. In some ways, it was just like the old days when Joe lived in Switzerland during his residency and was under Dr. First’s tutelage.

“I’ll do what I can to help you heal the physical ailments and to get you through the trial in one piece. For the malaise of your spirit, I brought you this.” Dr. First took out the digital Dictaphone and gave it to Joe.

He looked at it and then turned it on. Angelica’s music seeped out of it. Joe took the Dictaphone and held it up to his cheek. The sound of Angelica’s cello playing vibrated against his skin like a kiss. His emotions swallowed him in an instant and all he could do was look at Dr. First with tears streaming down his cheeks.

“How is she?” Joe asked.

“She’s coming along. She had another mini-breakdown during the second half of the concert when you weren’t there,” he said. “But she’s coming out of it much quicker this time.”

“I got a letter from her I don’t know how,” Joe said. “Was it real or did I imagine that as well?”

“It was real. She fell in love with you and I fell in love with that charming woman who sat next to you at the concert,” Dr. First said.

“Gloria! You fell in love with Gloria!” Joe smiled and then laughed. It was the first genuine laugh he had experienced in years. “Of course you fell in love with Gloria, only you.”

“I don’t know how she did it, but she got Angelica’s letter to you after I gave it to her. I thought you were coming back to your seat. I had no idea it was really you, Joe. Neither did Angelica, or Gloria. All we knew was that Angelica had fallen in love with a bald man in the third row with blue eyes. Last time I saw you, you had hair!”

“I know. It’s a new look, solitary chic!” Joe said.

“She’s a remarkable woman,” Dr. First said.

“Gloria?”

“I meant Angelica. Gloria too! They’re unbelievable. How did we get so lucky?”

“I don’t want her to see me like this. All the years I’ve dreamt of meeting her. It can’t be here,” Joe said.

“I understand.”

Dr. First prescribed his other treatment. He gave Joe an IPOD, which had all of Angelica’s music on it, along with everything from the Beatles, Bruce, Miles, Louis, the Stones, and more. He knew his friend’s eclectic taste in music.

“I don’t understand,” Joe said. “This is my treatment?”

“Just listen to it and let your imagination take you away from all of this,” he said.

“But I thought we’d need to keep me more grounded in reality,” Joe said.

“I’d want to escape too if I were you. It’s all right. Music can’t hurt you. It can only heal you,” Dr. First said. “Your imagination has taken you to great places. Let it take you there again.”

Joe was ushered back to his room. The guards were instructed to take away his IPOD headphones because they were too long and they were afraid he would strangle himself with them. Joe finally convinced them to let him keep the IPOD and listen to the music. He looked like Linus from the Peanuts Gang as he clutched the IPOD next to his cheek like a security blanket.

CHAPTER 14

The Glacier Express sailed through the Swiss Alps as Graham vacillated between feeling completely thrilled and utterly terrified as the train took flight and sailed through the sky, around treacherous mountain curves and over bridges obscured by clouds. The most unnerving part for him was when the train plunged into darkness without warning, swallowed up inside a tunnel in the belly of the mountains. He didn't know how long the darkness would last, never completely at ease until he saw the sunlight again.

Graham had never had a ride quite like this one. This was the last journey he would take as himself when he was just another passenger, an ordinary man who could fall prey to the forces of nature and get swallowed up by the whim of catastrophe should the train malfunction and jump off the tracks or crash and tumble down the side of a mountain.

Graham arrived in Switzerland several days ahead of Joe who was busy stringing the media on a wild goose chase that involved several foreign countries and various human decoys. He had a media team to orchestrate the cat and mouse game as they trained the press for his future unpredictability. The clinic where Graham was to have the transformative plastic surgery resided somewhere outside of the town of Davos, Switzerland in a remote section of the Alps. The clinic was accessible only by car and even then there were no signs or marked roads. One had to know where to go. When he got off the train, a red Mercedes-Benz waited for him as planned. The driver didn't even get out of the car as Graham put his luggage in the trunk. It was all so smooth and secretive.

Graham had a fearless nature and usually wore his bravado like a silk handkerchief tucked neatly in his pocket. He liked to think that he wasn't afraid of anything, not even death,

but the scenery overwhelmed him and the reality of the impending surgery was starting to sink in. He wasn't scared as much as he was kind of freaked out. He could handle pain, but the idea of his face being peeled back and then remolded to look just like Joe's left him queasy every time he thought about it. He would be trading in his individuality and his identity for someone else's, which was an absurd idea, but the only way to change his life and secure a fortune. Graham had lived so much of his life by his wits, surviving an abusive childhood, keeping his sanity in prison, and then maneuvering into his current situation so seamlessly, with almost too much ease. These were the dues he had to pay to make it all work. Graham looked forward into the abyss of this next part of the plan and felt the dizziness and the darkness of the unknown, as if he was still hurling through the bowels of the mountains.

To his surprise, he loved the mountains. He had spent most of his life in an urban setting and the beauty and the expanse of the mountains and the sky opened him up and made him feel raw, vulnerable, alive, and small all at the same time. He had lived so much of his life with an impenetrable armor around him, defenses poised and ready for a fight, building encroaching his vision of the sky that he wasn't expecting to feel so enthralled with his life. He felt humbled against something as big and beautiful as the Swiss Alps. It was a feeling he wasn't accustomed to and he liked it. The magic of the mountains stripped him of his bravado and launched him into an unexpected journey.

Graham got in the back seat of the Mercedes and looked through the dark-tinged, impenetrable glass that separated him from the front seat. The driver had toasted blonde hair that sprang out from beneath his chauffeur's cap, which was all Graham could see of him. Even the rearview mirror was angled out of sight. *They're not kidding about anonymity.*

Graham quickly scoured the other cars in the parking area to make sure this was the only red Mercedes Sedan. He didn't want to be in the wrong car and get kidnapped. The driver pulled away without saying anything. They rode the three hours in complete silence as the driver maneuvered expertly and hugged the road with a smooth ride and the speed of a race car as they traversed the winding mountain roads with unnerving ease.

They arrived at a chalet tucked into the mountains at the end of an unmarked road. The Chalet looked like it belonged in a snow globe and was perched on a ledge giving it spectacular view of the Alps. Olga was the only person waiting to greet Graham when the red Mercedes arrived at the top of the long, uphill drive. Otherwise, the chalet seemed deserted.

Olga took his suitcase out of the trunk with her strong, sturdy hands and elegant fingers as Graham got out of the sedan. He stretched his legs and marveled at her strength and her powerful presence. Olga was beautiful, but not in American, blonde barbie doll way. She had a handsome face with high cheekbones, an angular jaw, a long, aquiline nose, and full, round lips that seemed incongruous with the rest of her sturdy, chiseled features. She was tall with broad shoulders, a small waist and hips, and muscular arms and legs. She carried herself with a posture of confidence and calm. She greeted him with a warm smile and showed him into the reception area where a glass of champagne and a deliciously decorated cheese plate awaited him.

"I'll show you to your room in a moment, but first, let's celebrate," she said in perfect English and with a slight hint of an accent. She handed him a flute of champagne. They clinked and sipped.

"What are we celebrating?" Graham asked.

"You!"

She fed him a perfect strawberry with a drop of creme fresshe inside and a rich, dark chocolate on the outside. She smiled at him.

It was the perfect storm for Graham's great love affair with Olga. Graham had only to look in Olga's eyes that first moment he arrived to know that she was a woman who could endure his complications and understand his darker side. She could see beyond the circumstances and into the tenderest part of his heart, a part that hadn't surfaced in decades. The clinic was known to be not only the best in the world for plastic surgery, but the most discrete for its clientele. Notorious international hit men were known to use their services, along with Hollywood movie stars and aging debutantes. Secrets would be safe here and even safer with Olga.

They entered his room. Her gray eyes were level with his, like a cloudless night rich with stars and mystery. She was exactly his height, just under six feet tall and had long, chestnut colored hair that she dyed with subtle, colorful highlights and wore pulled back in a bun. She was a woman of few words even though she spoke several languages fluently, which suited Graham just fine.

She showed him around his room and informed him that she was going to be taking care of him during the *procedure* and afterwards throughout his recovery.

"My *procedure*? It's not like I'm getting root canal or a mole removed," he said.

She opened the curtains and the view of the Alps gave the room a picturesque, surreal quality, like he had just stepped into an oil painting or a glossy photograph. She pointed out the features of the room, a whirlpool and steam bath, a remote control that turned on or off every light and device in the room and a well-stocked refrigerator.

“Your meals will be served in a private dining room,” she said.

Graham looked her in the eyes so she could feel the lust and desire building up in him. He couldn't find any words to express what he felt. He didn't know what he felt except for the irrepressible urge to draw her close to him, not just in a physical sense but also in his heart. Something about being near her made him feel better. Maybe he was just reeling from the train ride or perhaps he was more frightened by the upcoming surgery than he admitted to himself. He knew one thing for certain, being near this woman made him feel calmer and more grounded, able to face anything.

“Private dining room, that sounds so institutional,” Graham said. “How about if I take you out to dinner, someplace quite and romantic?”

“I'll come for you at seven,” she said. “You should rest.”

He nodded. They understood one another perfectly.

Graham was still asleep when Olga knocked on his door at seven. When he didn't open it, she let herself in to check on him.

He opened his eyes.

“I can have them bring some dinner to your room,” she said. This time, her voice had a quality that was intimate, seductive.

“I don't want dinner. I just want you,” Graham said with uncomplicated honesty.

She didn't say a word and slipped off her dress slowly. He loved to watch her undress, the way she laid her clothes carefully over the chair near the window. Graham always remembered that moment, the way her shoulder bones curved like billiard balls at the top of her arms as she took the pin out of her hair and let it wander down the center of her back. She wore a taupe-

colored camisole and thong underpants. No other woman has ever looked as beautiful to him as she did at that moment.

His voice still carried the creakiness of sleep.

“You know I just fell in love with you,” Graham said as she slipped into the covers. “And I’m not the kind of guy who falls in love.”

“I know.” She didn’t say another word as her warm body nestled against his.

They didn’t even kiss right away. Graham rubbed the palm of his hand gently over every inch of her body. She left her silk camisole and her underwear on as they explored one another’s bodies with their fingertips and tongues, which was really erotic. He felt the heat rise off her skin. Her nipples hardened, her body moistened. She smelled like an olive tree or some kind of rare, indigenous plant.

She took the tip of her finger and caressed every inch of his face from his eyes to his lips to every curve of his cheek, jaw and forehead. Graham imagined her painting a protective and invisible coating with her fingertips, which would ensure his success in the surgery.

Graham understood that she was recording the memory of his true face with the tips of her fingers. He hoped they’d both remember what he really looked like when the surgery was all over. He felt so grateful to have her as his witness. Her perfectly sculpted body stretched out next to his. He was convinced that her touch had healing powers. Her kisses emblazoned a memory that would carry him through the grueling transformation that lay ahead of him.

By the time Joe arrived three days later, Graham and Olga were deeply in love. They had spent every moment of their time together. They made love, talked about their pasts, expressed

their fears, and proclaimed their love for one another. It felt like the most natural thing in the world. For once, Graham was the one who caught the lucky break. Joe was truly happy for him.

The day before the surgery, Sturgis was scheduled to arrive. They were supposed to sign the final contracts, which would outline the parameters of their arrangement. There were aspects of the arrangement that Joe and Graham never really considered when they first hatched the plan to transform Graham into Joe's public double.

But Sturgis thought of every possible scenario: What if one of them dies, becomes ill or wants out of the arrangement? What if one of them fathers a child? Who would be responsible for any lawsuits that would arise as a result of Graham's behavior when he was acting as Joe? How would the exit strategy be implemented if the arrangement didn't work out or if one or both of the parties wanted to terminate the agreement?

Sturgis's job was to be thorough and to incorporate every possible scenario into the legal arrangement. Sturgis's arrival meant that Joe and Graham had to deal with the business part of their plan, which always strained any relationship. They were having too much fun with the friendship part of their relationship to sober up.

Joe had never seen Graham like this before. Even his face looked different, he was so happy. His smile relaxed into his jaw when he looked at Olga. Graham was only a few years younger than Joe, but he looked decades younger than Joe when he was with Olga. Graham's expressions became almost boyish, he was so giddy with love for her.

Olga took on a Goddess like aura to Graham. He saw her as he did that moment she undressed, unclothed in pretentiousness and shimmering with an earthy sensuality. Having Joe there made his relationship with Olga even more real because Joe witnessed it first hand. Joe was

the only other guardian of the love that Graham and Olga had for one another. In future months and years, Joe and Graham could share this understanding in a way that no one else could.

Graham's love for Olga was just another bond that Joe and Graham shared, the perfect secret to share on the eve of the future they would share with more than just their faces.

The day that Sturgis was scheduled to arrive, Graham and Olga woke Joe up just before sunrise. Joe was still jet lagged from the trip over and the cross-continent cat and mouse game he played with the media, so four A.M. held no real significance to his circadian rhythms.

“Get up, get dressed, and bring something nice to wear. We're getting married today and you're our best man,” Graham announced as he climbed on Joe's bed, jumped up and down, and shook him like a kid would.

“Married!”

“Get up. Let's go,” Graham said.

Joe got up, got dressed. By the time he reached the private dining room, Olga had prepared a breakfast picnic for them. Joe sipped hot coffee mixed with Swiss chocolate in the back seat of her red Citroen. She swerved through the mountains as the sun came up and Joe spilled the coffee on his shirt. The brightness in the car radiated from their excitement and the new day.

Joe had never seen Graham like this, so happy and carefree. He felt genuinely happy for him. Olga had a glow in her eyes when she looked at Graham. It was the first time Joe had been in the presence of two people who loved one another so completely. He basked in the warmth of it. Joe had never been so close to another human being, except maybe his mother and she died over ten years ago.

Joe loved Olga for what she brought to Graham's life. In that car ride, he realized how much he had grown to love Graham. Graham was like his brother, more like his twin already, not just his friend. In those ugly, truthful moments, Joe understood that he was also Graham's employer and Graham was his employee. During the months of preparation for Graham's new role in Joe's life they had become so close that Joe was convinced they could actually feel one another's emotions, almost read one another's minds. Joe knew Graham so well and understood that this level of joy was something new for him.

They arrived at the small village tucked into the mountains. Joe marveled at how foreign and storybook everything seemed. The homes were made from mostly stucco and painted in pastel colors with wood shutters and rich wood doors with door knockers. Pristine mountain air and brightly colored flowers saturated the town. Many of the homes had paintings of figures or symbols on the outside that reminded Joe of family crests or cartoons. Olga's house had half-nude nymphs engaged in various activities of combing their hair, lounging, or picking flowers at each of the corners of the windows.

They entered through a geometric wood door layered with honey-colored oak. Planters of purple pansies lined the windows on either side of the door. It was so different from the urban landscape that Joe was used to, he felt like he had walked into a fairytale.

Graham and Olga kissed one another goodbye and split off into two separate areas of the house to get ready for the wedding. While Olga busied herself in the upstairs bedroom, Joe and Graham took over the downstairs guest suite.

“The next time I kiss her, I’ll be married to her,” Graham said. Joe could hardly believe that this was the same man whom he had known for several years. He didn’t look even like himself, yet he still had the same face.

“You look great!” Joe said.

“And you’re going to look even better when I’m through with you,” Graham said. He got to work and pulled out all his stops as a makeup artist. Between his training when he studied theater and the instructions he got from the makeup professionals in anticipation of being Joe’s double, Graham had become quite proficient at creating disguises. Joe gave into him completely and didn’t even look in the mirror until he was finished. It took over an hour to transform his face.

“I look like you!” Joe laughed. Graham altered Joe’s nose and forehead with rubber prosthetics and was able to blend it in seamlessly. The likeness made them look like brothers, twins, but this time with Graham’s face. Joe didn’t look like himself anymore, which allowed him to move about freely.

They dressed in suits and ties. Joe nearly cried as they left the house ahead of Olga and walked toward the only church at the other side of town whose steeple loomed against the backdrop of the mountains.

The narrow, cobblestone streets wound toward the church, as people greeted them in this small town. As they walked, doors opened, people smiled and came out of their houses. A little girl of about seven ran up to Joe and Graham and handed them each a flower. She called her friends and soon, they were being followed in pied piper style. People of all ages and sizes joined the procession with flowers and cakes and bottles of wine. The wedding was a whole-town affair.

They arrived at the church. Joe suddenly panicked.

“The rings! Don’t you need wedding rings?” he asked.

“Some best man you are. That’s your job,” Graham said.

“If there’s something open I’ll buy you the rings,” Joe said.

Graham smiled and pulled out a ring box from his pocket. “You panic too easily, Joe” he said to Joe. Graham and Joe laughed as someone took a snapshot of them. This time, Joe didn’t mind. No one knew he was Joe Coyote and he doubted if anyone here would even care if he was some famous billionaire. It was Graham they cared about because he was marrying one of their own.

Graham as the groom carried himself with a graciousness that made Joe proud. He let old women kiss him on the cheek as they mumbled their good wishes in Romanesh, a dialect of the region. Little kids came up to him and gave him candy, a custom that was meant to bring him a sweet life. He bowed to them and they giggled. Elderly men offered him advice and sideways glances with a nudge in the ribs. Graham just smiled and went along with it. He had no idea what they were saying to him, but it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered to him except Olga.

“You’re a class act,” Joe said to Graham as they waited at the altar for her to arrive.

“I learned from the best,” Graham said.

It was the most emotional day of their lives together. The crowded church seemed alive with chatter and gaiety. Then suddenly everyone quieted down in anticipation of the bride’s arrival. It was cool and dark in the church with colored light streaming in from the stained glass windows. The sound of an organ lifted up out of the shadows and seemed to fill the brilliant, dusty light with sound and murmurs. He wondered if this is what sounds look like to a person

with Synesthesia. It was on Joe's mind because he had just been contacted by his former mentor to help a patient of his who had the sight fused with sound variety. He thought of this patient, a cellist whom he hadn't yet met as he watched the colors shimmer and dance, rise and recede with the changing sunlight and the lively organ. It was mesmerizing, fascinating.

The church doors opened and brilliant white light streamed in like a powerful ocean wave. Joe kept his eyes on Graham who waited with the eagerness of a child for the appearance of his beloved Olga. So this is what true love looks like on a man's face, Joe thought. Graham looked like he'd walk through fire for her without even flinching.

Then Olga walked in and the collective gasp and the chattering of the crowd gave way to full blown applause and cheering. Olga looked beautiful, radiant as the sun accompanied her through the doorway. Her simple pink dress clung to her body and hung down to her ankles. She had a white lace shawl around her shoulders and her dark hair was pinned back with a row of flowers and baby's breath interwoven in the form of a crown. She had on just the right amount of makeup to compliment her features and to accentuate her full red lips and wide-set, almond shaped eyes. The bright light that surrounded her paled compared with the brilliance of her smile when she looked at Graham.

Music played as she walked slowly down the aisle. She greeted her friends and gave them all a chance to soak up her loveliness and her love. She never took her eyes off of Graham. By the time she reached the altar, Joe had tears streaming down his cheeks.

"You're going to ruin your makeup," Graham whispered to him. Joe smiled. Olga stood between them.

The ceremony was fast and in another language, so Joe and Graham had to be prompted by Olga to hand over the rings, kiss the bride, etc. He kissed the bride and in his heart, Joe let him go. He couldn't possibly take Graham away from her now. He decided to call off the surgery. Maybe the surgery was never really meant to happen and they were meant to come here for this wedding, this great love.

After the ceremony, they all went outside and the villagers had an impromptu reception waiting for them. They ate and drank and sang and danced. Someone snapped a Polaroid of Joe, Olga, and Graham and gave it to Joe. He tucked it into his suit pocket and thanked the man profusely.

The morning celebration lasted until just after lunch when they all dispersed to their homes for an afternoon nap, which was custom. Graham, Olga, and Joe arrived back at Olga's house. Joe changed into his classic jeans and tee shirt, grabbed a baseball cap and headed out the door.

"Where are you going?" Graham asked.

"Does it matter?" Joe asked.

"You're right. Get out of here!" Graham said. They hugged one more time.

"I'm happy for you. Really happy," Joe said.

"I know you are. Now go find some hot babe or a book to read or something to do," he said.

Joe wandered back to the town. Some of the villagers offered to take him to the national park close by. He went hiking with them along mountain paths. The scenery swallowed him up and Joe gladly surrendered to the mountains and the sky and the stream of water that ran like a

silver ribbon through the flowing mane of earth and grass. They stopped by a hot spring to rest and drink and dip into the effervescent waters. Joe didn't understand a word they were saying, but it didn't matter. He felt so at peace, so rejuvenated that he dipped into the water as if it were a womb in the earth. He kept his baseball cap on low over his eyes and shielded his face from the sun while he clinked glasses with them and swigged back some more wine.

This could be heaven he thought as he lay back on the grassy embankment and closed his eyes. When he awoke several hours later the sun was lower in the sky and only one guy remained to watch over him. He wasn't used to drinking so much wine and so early in the day.

They hiked back to the entrance of the park and Joe had the feeling that he wasn't inside his body anymore. Everything seemed so unreal, with the mountains and the wedding and the look on Graham's face. It could just have easily been a dream.

By the time they arrived back at Olga's house, it was dark. Graham was dressed for the trip back to the chalet. Joe's bags were packed and he was surprised to find that Olga wasn't going with them.

Graham kissed her goodbye. She wore a black satin bathrobe that was loosely tied in the front. Graham kissed her with his whole body and reached in and took hold of her breast and kissed it. Joe turned away.

"Why aren't you coming with us?" Joe asked.

"He needs his sleep. Tomorrow's a big day," she said and kissed him one last time. Olga turned and walked upstairs as Graham headed them out the door. Joe had thought about the surgery since that morning and had decided that Graham should remain himself and stay in Switzerland with Olga.

“Wait! Let’s just cancel the surgery,” Joe said.

“We can’t,” Graham said.

“I mean it,” Joe said. “We’re not doing it.”

Olga walked down a couple of steps toward him. She looked at Joe and with the most earnest tone said, “It’s going to be okay.”

“Joe, I’m in this thing too far,” Graham said.

“I’ll still pay you what we agreed to. Think of it as my wedding present,” Joe said.

Olga looked at Graham. Joe could tell by just a couple of subtle facial expressions that they had had a lengthy and involved conversation about this topic. Already they had the unspoken language that married couples develop after a lifetime of being together.

“I mean it. I’m not signing the papers. You can’t leave Olga,” Joe said.

“I’m not leaving Olga. I’ll never leave Olga. We’ll be together forever in our hearts. Joe you don’t understand,” he said.

“Then explain it to me,” Joe said.

The silence that followed left Joe feeling cold or sad or just isolated. He was never going to understand why Graham didn’t back out of the deal. It couldn’t have been about the money. Joe would have gladly given him the money not to do it. He offered Graham twice the amount to walk away from the surgery once they were in the car.

“If I fell in love, I would want to be with the woman whom I loved,” Joe said.

Graham drove through the darkness on the mountain road and said very little.

“Do you even know where we’re going?” Joe asked.

“I’m never quite sure, but I’ll know when we arrive,” Graham said.

“I mean it. Love like this doesn’t come along every day. I’ve never been in love like you two are. Don’t walk away from it,” Joe said.

“Coyote, I know you’re saying this because you care about me,” Graham said.

“I love you like you’re my brother!”

“And I love you like you’re my brother, which is why I’m going through with it. Olga will wait for me,” Graham said.

“Then we’ll have to work it out so that you see her at least once a month and I’ll send you over in my private jet.”

“I’m going to see her tomorrow. Actually, you’ll see more of her tomorrow. I won’t be awake for most of it,” Graham said. “But she will be taking care of me during my recovery, which is a good thing because this woman can really take care of me if you know what I mean.”

They both succumbed to the darkness and the reality that lay ahead. The road seemed treacherous as it unfolded in front of them.

“You know I never thought I’d say this,” Graham said as he broke the silence in the car.

“Say what?”

“I’m all fucked out. I can’t believe it! I’ve never been fucked out. I had so much sex today that I could have used up my quota for the year,” he said. “At least for the next six months.”

“Really, you?”

The conversation turned to Graham’s sexual escapades and even though Joe was slightly uncomfortable with all that information, especially when he’d have to make small talk with Olga before and during the surgery tomorrow he was grateful for the distraction and the humor.

Through their laughter and Graham's exaggerated recounting of their afternoon, Joe detected something else. He didn't know what it was exactly, but he knew that Graham was wrestling with his demons at the same time that he was talking about lust in his animated way.

"Thanks," Graham said and his sincerity rang into Joe's heart.

"For what?"

"Just being here with me, being happy for me, and for your offer to walk away from it," Graham said.

"My offer still stands. You can take me up on it anytime," Joe said.

"I know. That's why I'm thanking you. You're a great man, Joe Coyote."

Back at the clinic, Sturgis fumed in his room. He had arrived hours ago expecting to get right to work and there wasn't so much as a message or a phone number where they could be reached. By the time they returned it was nearly midnight and his frustration had boiled over. They had agreed in the car not to tell Sturgis about the wedding or Graham's relationship with Olga. The less Sturgis knew about Graham's personal life, the better off he was, or so Graham convinced Joe.

"You've got major surgery in the morning, we still haven't signed all the necessary papers, and you're just being inconsiderate and irresponsible," Sturgis said.

"I'm not going to be able to pick my head up from the pillow for a month! We were just having some fun, so back off. We're here now. Let's see those papers." Graham said.

Joe had the urge to duck whenever he was around the two of them. It usually took no more than three minutes for Sturgis to get this look over something that Graham said or did or didn't say or didn't do. It was a quietly smoldering anger, one that never erupted, but Joe had

never seen Sturgis have this reaction with anyone else in all the years that he'd known him. He didn't know what to do or how to handle Sturgis in this situation. Sturgis always covered up his emotions with his Southern gentlemanly smile, the one that revealed nothing, but convinced so many people of his affability.

"I'm sorry, Joe. I've got more than a little trepidation about Graham's ability to do justice to your name," Sturgis said.

"So do I. Maybe we should call the whole thing off," Joe said.

Joe caught a glimpse of Graham's face just behind Sturgis's shoulder. A look of urgency and fear jumped out at Joe before Graham slipped into his poker face. He shook his head slightly and Joe understood the whole conversation in that one gesture. Graham begged him not to back down.

Sturgis turned and faced Graham so that his back was to Joe. "You know the repercussions if the deal doesn't go through at this point," Sturgis said.

The look in Graham's eyes frightened Joe. "I won't get any money," Graham said. But it was more than the money and Joe knew it. He just didn't know how much more.

The next morning, Olga avoided looking at Joe and Graham as they wheeled Graham into the surgery room. Joe was surprised at how small the room was and the that fact that it was just going to be the four of them: Graham, Olga, Joe, and the plastic surgeon whose name he never knew. Their anonymity was that tight. Graham would be unconscious, Olga would be assisting the surgeon and administering the anesthesia and Joe would be the live model who provided the surgeon with a living template of Graham's new face. Joe had spent many hours in surgery during medical school and his residency, so he could also assist the doctor in any way. It would

keep the number of people at the surgery to a minimum. When the surgeon peeled back Graham's face that day, the vision of the underside of his skin all rubbery and sinewy and raw stayed with Joe and haunted him often in his dreams and nightmares. The technology he used was a cross between a three-D printer and a robotic surgery arm. The surgeon took measurements of Joe face during the surgery with a laser pointer, then input it into the robotic machine, which then guided the surgeon to rebuild Graham's face from the inside out to look exactly like Joe's.

Joe had no idea what the plastic surgeon looked like because he wore a face mask, hyper-magnified goggles, which made his eyes look unnaturally large, and a covering over his head. He would command Joe to respond with a facial expression to an emotion or a situation. He'd say, 'surprise' and Joe would try to look surprised. Then he'd say, afraid and Joe would look afraid, which wasn't hard to pull off because he was terrified. Then he said a word in German or Dutch, which Joe didn't understand. Olga translated it.

"Laugh," she said. "He wants to know what your face looks like when you laugh."

He exchanged a look with Olga. The surgeon really didn't know who he was, or he was being ironic. Joe let out a fake laugh, which sounded more like he was choking on something or trying to poop.

The plastic surgeon shook his head, 'no' and asked him to try again.

After several attempts to imitate laughter without the use of his device, Joe stopped trying. The laughter gave way to terror and tears. The plastic surgeon measured his face as he cried.

By the time of Joe's trial, there were possibly four of the original five people alive who knew their secret: Joe, Olga, Sturgis, and maybe the surgeon. He was reminded of that old adage about the only way to make sure a secret is never told is to take it to the grave.

CHAPTER 15

The first time Joe met Pat Rodgers, he didn't know what to make of her. She looked a little school girlish and naive in a navy pin striped suit with a light pink blouse that matched her lipstick, hardly the look demeanor of a tough criminologist. Joe found her endearing and trusted her instinctively. Sturgis had arranged for the four of them to meet, Joe, Sturgis, Pat, and Dr. First to go over the strategy for Joe's defense, which was to claim insanity to avoid life in prison. The prosecution had already painted him as a ruthless human being for paying his best friend to give up his own face, his own identity. Joe suspected that Pat was included in this meeting to prove to Joe and Dr. First that they had pursued Graham tirelessly after Joe's alleged murder.

"I didn't kill Graham," Joe blurted out right away. "I didn't have anything to do with his murder. You all know this or you wouldn't have gone to great lengths to try to find him. I don't even think he was capable of murdering me, or having me murdered, whatever the case may be. We were really great friends."

"You're a little delusional, Joe," Stugis began. "I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this, but I don't think Graham was ever your friend, not really."

"I beg to disagree. I know you never liked him, but you weren't in that friendship with us. We really loved one another like brothers." Joe got very choked up. Pat watched Dr. First, looking for his reaction.

"But you did have a terrible fight with him and fired him the night before he was killed, did you not?" Sturgis asked.

"I did because I was mad at him for having sex with Angelica and letting her believe it was me!"

“Did he actually have sex with her? Do you know that for sure?” Pat asked.

“No. I don’t know for sure what happened. I know she was naked and he admitted to ‘enjoying’ her body. That’s all I needed to hear.” Joe looked weary.

“How mad were you?” Sturgis asked. “I’m sorry to be so pointed.”

“Really mad, but not as mad as I was when the General flipped that switch on me and triggered murderous rage with my Electric Laughter watch,” Joe said.

“What are you talking about?” Pat asked.

“Did you not share our session with her? I thought you were recording our conversation when I told you everything.” Joe looked at Sturgis.

“I can share that with her, just relax. I have to get government clearance to do so, which shouldn’t take long.”

“Government clearance? You’re kidding me,” Pat chided Sturgis. “You don’t need government clearance. I’m his lawyer.” She was mad at Sturgis for withholding the information from her.

“No, *I’m his lawyer*. You are his criminologist on his team.”

“I took the bar exam. I’m also licensed in the state of Illinois. I want to know everything from that session. You know what, forget it! Joe, would you mind having a session alone with me and telling me your story?”

“Of course.”

“I’m sorry to make you go through that again. I just need to hear it from the source.”

Dr. First nodded slightly to Pat. Sturgis moved the conversation in another direction.

“Joe, I looked into your allegation about the watch being used to trigger something other than laughter. I even had them check the watch that Dr. First so effortlessly took from your wrist. The one you said the General had secured to your wrist and then activated with a remote control. It was a standard Electric Laughter. There was no program for murderous rage. There was no remote control or lock on the wristwatch. It was all a suggestive technique. The Electric Laughter watch the General gave you was programmed for laughter. Your brain just couldn’t connect with laughter for whatever reason,” Sturgis said. “Perhaps they brainwashed you into believing it was murderous rage.”

“I want to press charges. You can’t imagine the way they treated me!” Joe was outraged. “Talk about criminal!”

“Joe, I got them to agree not to investigate further regarding their allegations regarding terrorist activities, which was no easy feat. I had to pull some strings and call in some favors. You can’t mess with these guys. Just let it go and move on,” Sturgis said.

“I can’t move on. They crushed me! I couldn’t hear. I nearly lost my mind. Maybe I did lose my mind. They are pure evil.” Joe looked crazed when he spoke about them and enraged that he wasn’t being taken seriously by Sturgis.

“Joe, the years in isolation, the stress from being constantly hounded by the media, the trauma of witnessing Graham’s murder, and the guilt you feel for his death, whether or not you had any part in the assassination, you’ve expressed remorse for putting him in the position that ultimately lead to his death, all of these factors contribute to your brain being just a bit *off*. It’s understandable that you aren’t mentally well,” Sturgis said. “I don’t think I’d be either. None of us would be.” He looked at the others in the room.

“What exactly are you saying?” Joe asked.

“I want to make a case and plead not guilty by reason of insanity. It’s our best defense to keep you out of jail for life,” Sturgis said.

“I’m not insane. I may be a little crazy at times, that’s all. There’s a big difference,” Joe pleaded. “And I’m not a criminal!”

“I don’t see any signs of criminal behavior and you don’t seem insane to me, at least not now,” Pat said. Sturgis gave her a look.

“The prosecution will argue that five years in total seclusion supports the notion that you had something to hide and implies your guilt and culpability,” Sturgis said.

“I don’t think pleading insanity will be in his best interest,” Pat said.

“I didn’t ask you how you think we should plead. I’ve got quite a bit more experience than you do and Joe has been my dear friend for decades. I understand these matters a lot better than you do,” Sturgis said. He gave her a disapproving and angry glare, but she didn’t back down.

“Do you have a lot of close friends, Joe,” Pat asked him.

“Not really,” he replied.

“I didn’t think so,” she baited him.

“I choose my friends carefully,” he said.

“I respect that. You don’t seem like a guy who would kill his best friend, even in the heat of passion.”

“It doesn’t matter what really happened to Graham at this point. What matters is what the prosecution can prove about Joe’s motives and how convinced the jury is that Joe did it or had a

significant role in his death. I'm going to have to play the law a certain way in order to protect you. Do you understand that, Joe?" Sturgis asked.

"I think so." Joe looked at Dr. First.

"You know me better than anyone, Alvin. What do you think, *am I crazy?*"

"I think you're traumatized. I think you've been under an enormous amount of stress and carrying an overwhelming amount of grief. I think a lesser man would have committed suicide by now, quite frankly," he said.

"I'll take that as a compliment," Joe said half-jokingly.

"As Sturgis said, it doesn't really matter whether or not you're truly insane. What matters is if the prosecution can prove that you had enough of an involvement with Graham's murder to convict you," Dr. First said.

"They've got nothing on me. I haven't talked to anyone in five years," Joe said.

"Actually, they do have something on you," Pat said. She looked at Sturgis to see if she could keep talking. He nodded slightly and she continued.

"They've subpoenaed all my records from the years I investigated Graham and there were calls made to various underworld types from your private phones. Calls we assumed were Graham's, which the prosecution will link to you. These people are notorious criminals, killers in fact and the government is in a position to make some very sweet deals to get testimony regarding your involvement," she said.

"A jury doesn't need to see a photo of you holding the smoking gun to convict you. If they've got a really tight case, and word has it that they do, then you could end up in prison for the rest of your life without parole. Even if they can't find the actual guy responsible for the

murder, they can find some guy to testify that you ordered a hit on Graham. And who knows what Graham actually did when he was alive and was masquerading as you. We have no way of knowing that,” Sturgis said.

“And neither does the jury! Graham could have been acting as me when he hired the hit man. But who was he intending to kill? Me? Himself? Graham could have hired someone to kill me and they made a mistake and killed him instead. I think I’m alive by some fluke!” Joe said.

“Then how does that explain the two million dollar hideout that was conveniently well stocked with everything you’d needed to survive in the world indefinitely?” Sturgis asked.

“Graham gave me all that stuff. He set it up,” Joe said.

“And then he took the bullet, handed you millions of dollars, and wished you good luck. Was that it?” Sturgis asked.

“You don’t believe me,” Joe said. “How can I work with you if you don’t believe me?”

“It doesn’t matter if I believe you. It matters if the jury is going to believe you and they’re not. Your story is too suspicious. It all looks too premeditated. And if they believed you killed Graham or had anything to do with the murder, then you could spend the rest of your life in jail without parole at best.”

“What do you mean, *at best*?” Joe asked.

Sturgis and Pat exchanged a look. She spoke next. “If you go to jail, we may not be able to protect you. People get killed in jail all the time. They can make it look like a suicide.”

“I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“People get killed all the time who didn’t do anything wrong.”

“What are you saying?”

“There are people who don’t want you to know what they think you might know, even if you don’t know any of their dark secrets that they think Graham may have told you,” Pat explained.

“But I really don’t know anything,” Joe protested.

“That’s exactly what a man would say if he knew something and didn’t want anyone to know that he knew something,” Sturgis said.

“Joe, have you ever heard the saying, ‘the best way to keep a secret between two people is if one of them is dead?’” Pat asked.

Joe shivered. He knew they were right. He wouldn’t survive jail, he could just feel it in his heart.

“I have one question, if you thought Graham was still alive, why didn’t you tell anyone else about our situation?” Joe asked.

“Because the criminal mind feeds off of attention. The publicity that would have surrounded a witch hunt for him would have been tremendous. You know what a media hound he was back in the day. I didn’t want to play into his pathos, or deal with the media screwing up my chance of finding him,” Pat said.

“I’m the one who recommended keeping his existence a secret,” Sturgis said. “Because I hoped the lack of public attention would ultimately force him out of hiding and back into the lime light.”

“He didn’t care that much about the attention. He pretended he did, but deep down, he didn’t. He was just a guy,” Joe said.

“With a criminal past, ties to the mob, and no moral compass. He has a total disregard for what’s right in our society,” Sturgis said trying to keep his anger simmering beneath the surface.

Dr. First listened to their discussion and took it all in. It seemed logical, tactical even, but something didn’t sit right with him. He couldn’t put his finger on it until he reiterated the conversation to Gloria later that evening when they were in bed.

“If Graham was as much of a dangerous sociopath as they claim he was, how could they have let someone so undesirable loose in the world?” he asked her.

“Because they probably intended to kill him once they caught him,” Gloria said. “And they didn’t want anyone to know they were looking for him so they could kill him without the fanfare. Graham would have known that they would have searched far and wide for him. They wouldn’t have searched for Joe in the same city. My suspicion is that someone wanted both of them dead. Graham must have figured that out or gotten tipped off and maybe he thought Joe had the better chance to survive. I don’t know! Something is not right here, I just don’t know what it is.”

“What do you think it is?” Dr. First asked her.

“That’s not the question, the question is what *isn’t it?*” she said.

“I don’t understand.”

“What do we know that isn’t the truth? It isn’t true that Graham would have taken a bullet and sacrificed his life for Joe. I don’t even know him, but with all that witch hunting from Sturgis and the criminologist, Graham wasn’t the kind of person to give up his life and essentially commit suicide. His survival instinct was too strong, his will to live indomitable.”

She was right, Dr. First thought. She was always right! By the smile on her face, she let him know that that she could read his thoughts.

“I’d like to see him,” Angelica said.

“He’s not allowed visitors,” Dr. First said.

“You can get me in, I know you can,” she said.

“I think she should go,” Gloria said. “Perhaps seeing him will help them both. Being with him will help her delve deeper into her psychic energy.”

“I don’t want her delving deeper into her psychic energy. I want her to stay right here, in the present. I want her to be well,” Dr. First said. Even he hadn’t realized how emotionally charged this whole topic was for him.

“Alvin, my love. I know how much you love Angelica, we both love Angelica,” Gloria said as she reached out a hand for Angelica who took it.

“You two have to stop talking about me as if I’m not in the same room!” Angelica said.

“She’s right,” Gloria said.

“Please just tell me the truth. I can always see it in your voice when you’re holding something back,” she said.

“Joe said he doesn’t want you to see him like this. He’s not the man he once was,” Dr. First said.

“I still want to see him. I can reach him and help him, I know it! After all, I found the blue-eyed man in the third row in total darkness,” she said. “We’re still connected.”

The next day Dr. First, Sturgis, and Pat arranged to go to Joe’s home to look around. Joe told them where he had been living. Sturgis attained the house key from Joe’s personal items that

the police took when Joe was arrested. As his lawyer, Sturgis was entitled to it. He had no choice. He didn't say too much about some of his quirks and the holograms. He decided to let them discover those all on their own.

He knew Sturgis wouldn't reveal the whereabouts of his hideout because he wouldn't want to risk the media catching wind of it and destroying any evidence he might be able to uncover. Sturgis was stingy that way, or maybe just protective.

The three of them arrived at Joe's brownstone in the middle of the day. It was late fall and the November winds had already blown all the leaves off the trees so they looked undressed and weary. The park was empty except for a couple of homeless people asleep on the benches.

It didn't take long for them to see the cameras hooked up to the ceilings in every room. Sturgis thought they were security cameras and further proved Joe's paranoia, thus supporting the insanity plea.

Joe's closet spoke volumes about his mental state. Sturgis took notes and photographs of everything, the dresses, the fake breasts, the makeup, the shoes and even the fashion magazines that Joe used to keep up with the latest trends.

"Paranoid schizophrenic?" Sturgis asked Dr. First.

"Or beauty queen in the making," he replied.

"I guess 'queen' would be the operative word," Sturgis said in an attempt to be funny. Pat and Dr. First ignored him.

"I don't think he was gay or transgender," Pat said. "I think he was simply desperate and wanted to make himself look like someone else entirely."

The stereo system in the living room had speakers as tall as Sturgis with a contraption hooked up to it. Sturgis clicked on the sound with the remote control. Angelica's cello music leapt out at them. Pat was so startled, she jumped back. Sturgis turned it off quickly, before the hologram appeared.

"Obsessive personality disorder," Sturgis said to Dr. First in a semi-quizzical way.

"Maybe he just likes her music," Dr. First said.

Pat caught Dr. First's eye and with a look that let him know not to argue with Sturgis. The two of them quickly came to an understanding that even though Sturgis ran the show, they were allies and would band together.

After several hours of snooping, Sturgis was ready to leave. Pat took one last look around and nodded slightly to Dr. First.

"The video cameras in every room are enough to support his mental instability," Sturgis said. "He was clearly paranoid. He even had one in the shower."

"I didn't see any signs of criminal behavior," Pat said. "I get why he was a little paranoid. Someone did try to kill him."

"We're looking for signs of mental and emotional imbalance. We're not trying to prove that he did it or didn't do it, that he was or wasn't capable of doing it. We're trying to show that even if he did do it, he was so out of his mind that the lines between fantasy and reality were blurred, so therefore he can't be held responsible for his actions," Sturgis said.

"And who's in charge of his money and his estate now that he's back in the real world even though he's incapacitated, or indisposed, I should say?" she asked.

"I am, as always," Sturgis said.

“Interesting,” Pat commented. The silence that followed erupted with Sturgis’s ire.

“I’m not the one on trial here and I suggest you get over this attitude,” he said curtly to Pat. The two looked at one another in a standoff. She was going to go toe-to-toe with him.

“I didn’t hire you to question my authority. We’ve got a big job to do and you will not start with your little innuendos,” Sturgis said.

“I didn’t say anything accusatory,” Pat defended herself.

“You didn’t have to,” Sturgis said.

Dr. First left them to bicker on their own. He wandered up to Joe’s study where Joe had been working on something that looked like it was an extension of the emotional DNA chain, Joe’s major discovery and the roadmap to Electric Laughter. He had managed to locate the spot in the brain right near the hippocampus that controlled emotions. Now it looked like he was trying to unleash the equation that would lead one step beyond. He was trying to chart the place in the brain that was responsible for the *impulse* to feel an emotion. It wasn’t just the emotion or the memory that Joe was interested in. It looked like he was searching for the key to desire, the longing to feel something, anything.

“I’ve got all that I need,” Sturgis said to Dr. First. “How about you? Anything?”

“I’m not sure. I may need to come back. Any chance you could leave the key with Pat? I know how busy you are,” he said.

“I could leave the key with you,” Sturgis said.

“I don’t want that responsibility. Then Pat can drive me and pick me up,” Dr. First said. “I think at least two of us should be here at any given time.”

“Agreed. You’re welcome to stay for a while now and Pat can lock up when you’re done,” he suggested.

“It would be easier if I came back,” Dr. First said. “I’d like to have some time to contemplate what we just saw, then return when I’m a little bit fresher.” Sturgis had no choice. He gave Pat the key.

In the days that followed, Sturgis prepared his case and under the advice of Dr. First he called in other expert witnesses, prominent doctors in the field of psychiatry.

Dr. First saw Joe everyday after that under the guise of needing information for his case, but it was really just to provide him with human interaction and warmth. Dr. First managed to convince the prison officials that it was part of his treatment and preparation for the trial, which was rapidly approaching.

Some days they just played chess or listened to music. Other times they discussed the merits of Joe’s new neurological project or whatever sports teams were in the lead.

“How are you feeling?” he asked Joe.

“Better. It’s the music. It really helps.”

“She wants to see you. She keeps insisting,” he said. Joe stopped moving with the chess king in his hand.

“How can I let her see me like this? I’m in a prison uniform, in a cage. They wouldn’t even let her in the same room with me,” Joe said.

“She’s relentless. Every day when I come home she quizzes me for hours about you. She wants to hear every word that you said. It’s exhausting. I promised her that I would set something up with you. How about tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow! I can’t possibly be ready by tomorrow,” Joe said, but his heart leapt at the thought of seeing her in person again.

“Joe, I think it would be good for you. I know it would be good for me. You have no idea how exhausting it is to live with two strong-headed women who are both much smarter than me. They know things and converse with one another without saying a word. Tomorrow it is,” Dr. First said as he helped Joe move his hand to where he was about to put the ring.

That night when Dr. First came home, she knew without him telling her that tomorrow was the day.

Angelica arrived an hour early for her visit with Joe. There were always scores of journalists lined up to see who was visiting Joe Coyote. This was the most highly publicized trial and there was no way around it. Angelica stayed in her car until Dr. First could send out security to escort her in. She was dressed in a big coat and put the hood up and kept her head down.

Angelica hadn’t been able to return home to her mother’s house since Joe’s arrest because the house was under constant watch by the press. They had gotten wind of Joe’s interest in her when he was arrested at her concert. Her ensuing breakdown during the second half of the performance only fueled their lust for gossip. Seeing her here would surely feed the dragon of gossip mongers in the world. Even if they didn’t know for sure if it was her. They knew. They always knew.

Once inside, Angelica was taken to a small, airless waiting room where she stayed alone. Angelica closed her eyes and meditated as she had been instructed to do with Gloria’s help. The room was quiet, a visual blank canvas. She managed to clear her mind and her memory of the accosting reported from her brain rather quickly. Dr. First entered with her cello in its big, black

case that looked almost like a woman's body with its curves and almost perceptible pregnant belly.

She held onto the cello case, then closed her eyes again and returned to her meditation. She envisioned a stream that flowed down from somewhere in the heavens, through the center channel in her body, and into the earth from the soles of her feet. The water flowing through it reflected the sky and also served as a magnifying glass for the earth so she could receive the energy from above while still being grounded and receive energy from the physical world. Her cello was part of that flow of energy from the heavens and earth.

The stream changed color according to the sun, the sky, the feelings in her heart, and the sounds that permeated her consciousness. The stream was meant to carry her emotions away from her, cleansing her and making room for new ones. As a thought or sensation arose, she let the water change to its natural color all the while observing instead of judging. She focused on letting it flow instead of trying to absorb the colors and the textures of the stream. She imbued the cello with healing energy.

Dr. First sat quietly. He watched her closely. She could sense him staring at her. The stream in her imagination swirled with green and blue on the edges as he made little coughing noises. Her thoughts went to Joe Coyote remembering how his blue eyes welled up with tears while he listened to her concert. She had no idea who he was at the time. She just knew that he loved her by the mist of golden light that surrounded him. The stream in her meditation turned navy blue with a thread of gold weaving its way down the center.

Joe's return to the world on television made him look colorless inside. Angelica purposefully imagined pouring the blue/gold stream into his colorless body, starting from the top

of his head and running out the bottom of his feet. She filled in the transparent lifelessness of his body with the dense, rich hues from the sun tipped, aqua blue stream.

Suddenly, something jumped out of the water. It looked like a big silvery salmon, pink and shiny and shimmering in the sunlight. It was a man, not a fish.

“Angelica Johnson,” a voice said. “Follow me.” The man was thin and had a very beige, unemotional voice.

Angelica took a moment to compose herself. She shifted her awareness from her meditation back to the small waiting room where Dr. First squirmed with anticipation under the cheesy yellow lights.

She picked up her cello and followed the attendant down a long, dark hallway. Her shoes made a gray clicking sound that rose up at her heels in little bursts, like fistfuls of dark dirt.

He showed her to a room that was the size of a sound proof booth. There was one chair, no windows except for the thick bulletproof glass that lined the wall that lead to an identical, adjoining room on the other side. In front of the chair at eye level was a slotted opening that she could speak through. Angelica placed her coat on the chair, took out her cello and positioned herself and her instrument in the small space. They barely fit, but she was poised and ready for Joe. There wasn't a sound or a color in the room. She waited.

Several moments later a door opened in the opposite room, and Joe Coyote walked in. His head hung slightly toward his shoulders as the guard took off his handcuffs. He stood up straight and walked quickly to the window.

There were no words that could do justice to how they felt, so they said nothing to one another the entire time. She placed her palms on the glass at shoulder level. He matched his

palms to hers and looked her in the eye. They were face-to-face, inches apart, close enough to breathe in the other's scent. All he wanted to do was to take her in his arms and hold her. This was as far as he could go, but it was closer than he'd ever been.

She took her bow and placed it on the cello and began to play. Instead of a piece of classical music, she gently and hopefully played a cello rendition of the Beatles, *All You Need is Love*. Joe was so moved and so surprised that he smiled and laughed and cried.

As the music wrapped itself around him with the sound hug that replaced the real hug she wanted to give him, he drank in the sight of her, the contour of her cheeks, the aqua blue of her eyes, the luscious curve of her lips, the silkiness of her jet black hair, and love in her eyes. He could feel her presence inside his psyche and in his soul. She was inside him now, inside his life and his heart and in his body, even in his energy field somehow.

As Angelica stared into Joe's eyes, she envisioned the stream again and this time added passionate reds and heartwarming yellows and all the colors of her emotions. She poured them like honey into him through the connection they had with their eyes and through her music.

Joe felt something shift inside of him. The tectonic plates of fear and doubt and heartbreak from this broken man recalibrated with her and her music.

The guard came back in before she could finish the song. She stopped and kissed her two fingers and then held them up to the thick glass wall. Joe did the same on the other side so their fingers served as the proxy for their lips. It was the most profound and healing five minutes that Joe had in his whole life.

As the guard escorted her out, she turned back and caught one more glimpse of Joe. Tears of joy and gratitude trailed down his cheeks. He stood up straight, stared after her with a promise in his heart and on his eyes that he would do whatever he had to do so they'd be together again.

He could never find the words to tell her how much he loved her, but by the look in his eyes and in her eyes, he didn't need to.

CHAPTER 16

The sky was already dark by five o'clock when Angelica, Dr. First, and Pat arrived at Joe's house, though it felt like the middle of the night. They kept the outside lights off and closed the drapes so as not to call attention to themselves or to alert other people in the neighborhood.

"What's with all the cameras?" Angelica asked.

"Maybe it is part of an elaborate security system," Pat said.

"Then why are they pointing toward the floor and inside the house? Shouldn't they be aimed at the windows and doors in case an intruder tries to break in?" Angelica asked.

Dr. First looked at Pat who didn't have the answer. Angelica picked up the remote control from the table in the living room. She clicked it on and her cello music filled the room. It was so loud that it startled all of them. She went to turn down the volume and instead, pressed the button that activated her hologram.

Angelica jumped back and screamed as her ghostlike self sprang to life, inches from where she was standing. She reached out and touched her transparent, jet black hair and split open her head so that white light shot out from the place where her hand interrupted the hologram. She walked around herself, stunned and amazed and moved to tears.

"My God," she whispered.

"I had no idea," Pat said.

Angelica sat down in the chair that Joe used when watching the hologram performance. She leaned forward and watched herself play. Her hands moved with precision and kept up with all the difficult parts of the piece. She gave herself that sideways glance that Joe loved so much. She couldn't even imagine how he got that to work, how he captured an emotion out of thin air.

And in that moment she was able to feel all that he felt for her. It was overwhelming how much he loved her. His capacity for love far exceeded anything she had ever experienced and humbled her completely.

“Perhaps we should turn it off,” Dr. First said, always the over-protective father figure to Angelica.

“No, leave it on,” she said.

Hours went by and still, she wouldn’t leave the chair or the house.

“Angelica, at some point I have to go home,” Pat said. “And I’m not allowed to leave you here alone.”

“I understand,” she said.

Angelica asked for a few more moments as she explored the home and switched on all of her holograms. The bedroom hologram made Angelica laugh out loud.

“I’ll never have that good of a body, but he’s got great taste in lingerie,” she said.

Pat enjoyed the humor.

Angelica discovered herself in the shower, again, sexier than she thought she’d ever look, in the kitchen making dinner with him, in the dining room sipping wine, and in various other rooms in the house. Love is in the details, she thought. All the gestures he designed for her holograms were simple ones that held great power and the aura of love. Angelica got so swept up by the likeness and the humanity of the holograms that she almost believed for an instant that they were real.

Angelica went back into his bedroom. As she walked toward his closet she could feel the hesitation in the air but she forged ahead. She turned on the light and saw the truth about Joe Coyote and she felt overjoyed.

The black dress with the white pearls hung at the front of the row of women's clothing. She was sure it was the same dress that she saw in her vision from Joe's chair at the Symphony Center of the woman who sat on the floor of the animal shelter scratching the belly of a three-legged dog. She reached out and touched the dress. The same scenario came back to her and flooded her inner vision with other images of Joe on the floor with different dogs, licking his painted lips, and shedding all over his lap. He looked weird as a woman, unnatural and kind of ugly, but there was something so endearing about him with these scruffy looking animals that Angelica loved him even more. He must have been so painfully lonely.

As she held the dress against her cheek, she turned around and saw Dr. First. She smiled so broadly that it frightened him.

"Angelica, we should go," Dr. First said. By the murky colors in his voice, Angelica knew that he was deeply concerned for her. She caught a glimpse of herself in his closet mirror. She looked slightly crazed. Her hologram self looked much better than she did at that moment.

"May I just have one more moment alone?" she asked. Dr. First hesitated, then he and Pat finally agreed to wait for her in the living room.

She wandered around Joe's bedroom one more time. The smell of him permeated everything. She wanted to climb into his bed naked and wrap herself in the Joe-scented sheets and cry until he came home. The urge to be near him was so overwhelming that she took out a sweater from one of his dresser drawers and held it up to her. It was another black, cashmere v-

neck sweater and she slipped it on over her head like a second skin, wrapped her arms around it, and hugged the soft texture. She felt the ache that Joe felt in his heart of longing and love and sadness and guilt and hope.

What it must be like to be Joe Coyote, she thought. How did he find the strength to carry all those emotions all the time?

She saw a Polaroid photo in a frame on the top of the oak dresser. She picked it up and stared at it. Joe looked so different in the photograph. His face didn't look like the face she saw the other day. She couldn't put her finger on it, but she knew something fundamental was altered in his appearance. Maybe he was heavier or his lack of a beard changed his look or the eyeglasses he wore in the photo distorted his nose? She couldn't figure it out and it really troubled her.

The other two people in the photo looked extremely happy. One of them must have been Graham. His photo from his pre-Joe days had been all over the news and the image in the photograph looked just like him. The other woman in the photo had a timeless expression. She had flowers in her hair and her face had a Botticelli quality to it, ethereal and painterly as she stared off in the distance.

Angelica heard Dr. First's footsteps coming up the stairs in soft, puffy clouds that swept into the room across the floor. She took the framed photograph and concealed it underneath the sweater.

"Let's go," she said as she walked out of Joe Coyote's room, still wearing his sweater. Neither of them questioned her about it.

Once outside, Angelica and Dr. First walked down the stairs and waited as Pat turned on the alarm and locked the door. She caught up to them and handed Angelica an identical house key and the numbers of the code.

“I probably shouldn’t do this,” she said. “And I trust that you won’t come here unless it’s absolutely necessary. I have to give the key back to Sturgis, so I made a duplicate. I don’t want to hang onto it for professional reasons. I need to be a woman of my word, but he never said you couldn’t have it.” Pat gave her the key with a slip of paper that had the alarm code.

Angelica wanted to hug her, but Pat had her professional demeanor in place, so Angelica thanked her and shook her hand warmly.

“Does Sturgis know about the holograms?” Angelica asked.

“I don’t think so, or he would have said something to me about them,” she said.

“I don’t know why I’m asking you this, but please keep this to yourself. It would mean a lot to me and I can’t even explain why,” Angelica said.

Pat agreed. Dr. First didn’t say a word.

That night, Gloria chatted on incessantly while Dr. First brooded during dinner. He was scheduled to leave the next morning for a conference on the West coast and his hesitation hung in the air in thick waves around the meatloaf.

Angelica tried to convince him that she was fine, but something disturbed him and he couldn’t articulate what it was and he didn’t want to leave them, either of them. Maybe just being back at Joe’s house made him think about how life must have been for him since Graham’s murder. He made Angelica promise that she wouldn’t step foot in the place until he came back to town and even then she was not allowed to go there alone. He told her it was because he didn’t

want the media catching wind of it. Even though they'd done their best to thwart the reporters, there was no telling it they'd find out.

She promised. She didn't need to go back. She had everything she needed to move forward right here.

Later, while he and Gloria washed the dishes, he made Gloria promise that she wouldn't let Angelica do anything stupid while he was gone.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Gloria asked. She was more amused than offended.

"It means the two women I love most in the world are going to be left alone to fend for themselves at a highly emotional and vulnerable time and I have a hunch something is going to happen," he said.

"So much for not believing in psychic energy, huh?" she was only half teasing him. She could tell he was really upset. "What are you worried about, Alvin?"

"I don't want her sinking into another catatonic state over this," he said. "I love Joe Coyote too. I just don't want to lose her again, or him! If something happens to her, he wouldn't survive."

"And if we do lose her and she sinks into another state, she'll come out of it again," she said.

"How can you say that?"

"Because it's true. She's in too deep to back out of the water now. She can only swim to the other side and climb out when she gets there. I'll do everything I can to make sure she doesn't drown before she reaches the shore."

"Thanks," he said. "And I don't even know what you're talking about."

Gloria reached out and hugged him. If only he could see what she could see and she was blind!

The morning after Dr. First left, Angelica approached Gloria with the one request she couldn't refuse.

"It's working. I know for a fact that all the meditation and psychic exercises are working," she said.

Angelica told her about the black dress with the white pearls and the dog pound visions, the sensation she had of watching her hologram and feeling what it felt like to be Joe Coyote, and the eerie feeling she had when she looked at the photograph she stole from his house.

Gloria instructed her to get the photograph. The first thing Gloria did with the photograph was to hold it to her heart. Since she couldn't see with her eyes, she used other body parts to connect to the vibrations. Angelica often saw her baking with her nose, (white flour always on the end of it) or getting dressed with her cheeks, (she was remarkably color-coordinated for a woman without sight). The photograph spoke to her heart.

"There's a secret in here that's not mine to uncover," Gloria said.

"I know! I felt it too," Angelica said. "I just can't get to it and I need you to help me."

Alvin was right, Gloria thought. *We're going to do something stupid.*

When Angelica was in her last catatonic state, that dreamlike oasis that her brain trapped her in, she fell prey to it for several days. The longer she stayed in it, the greater the chance that she'd never emerge completely. Dr. First explained all this to Gloria at the time. What he didn't know, and what she opted not to tell him, was that in order to reach Angelica and to help her out of the wasteland, she had put herself in a kind of trance.

Her mother, her grandmother and great grandmother came from a long line of women who understood the magic and medicinal power of herbs and plants. They passed their knowledge down from generation to generation. Before the advances in medicine, there were only these women who held the secrets to altered states. Gloria had carried on the legacy. In her kitchen herb garden were plants and herbs that could invoke the powers of the psyche.

It was a slippery slope. Even she had times when the medicine, as she called it, was too strong and she had trouble coming back. The potion she infused the night she started to bring Angelica back made her hands weak and her ears numb. It frightened Gloria because without those senses, she would be lost in the world.

Still, it was worth it. She knew Angelica had powers she could tap into, if only she could access them. It was risky. If Angelica had stayed in those murky waters much longer, she may not have emerged with so much shine.

“I have a way to open your powers, but it’s dangerous,” Gloria said.

“So is rotting in jail for a crime you didn’t commit.”

Both women understood that there wasn’t much time left. Joe’s trial would begin within the week. It was expected to be fast and uncomplicated. There were two factions brewing in the public sentiment: those who thought that Joe was innocent and regarded him as somewhat of a martyr or hero, and those who thought he was guilty and were appalled that he got away with murder and wanted to see him go to jail for life. His case was plastered all over the papers.

The black, cashmere sweater connected Angelica to Joe in a physical way, to his energy and to his psyche. She loved being inside of it. It was like wearing someone else’s skin, though she often couldn’t take it for very long. Inside Joe’s energy, there was a level of intelligence and

brilliance that she had never experienced before. It was fascinating at first. Then it started to wear on her like the midday sun in summer beating down on her head. She couldn't take it for long periods of time. It was too much, even for her.

Then there was the loneliness. Angelica was accustomed to being alone and sometimes felt lonely, but this was a different sensation. Joe's loneliness had an aching quality to it and after a while she could feel it in her arms and her chest, as if someone was gripping her, nearly crushing her, so she couldn't move.

When she'd first put on the sweater, she was flooded with warmth and kindness and tenderness. She likened the feeling of being soothed in her psyche to the underbelly of those dogs he so gently rubbed at the pound. Just the aroma of him made her feel loved and ignited with a passion she had never known before.

She wore that sweater like an invisible cloak, her armor against the world. It brought her closer to him than she'd ever been, even closer than they got during the months they corresponded after he gave her the Electric Laughter Watch. He never knew how much those conversations brought her back to life after her first breakdown.

She put on the Electric Laughter watch, along with Joe's sweater, and went into the living room. She hadn't felt the need to use the Electric Laughter watch very often since she emerged from the murky waters of her last breakdown. Perhaps it was because she had less daily stress on her since she was still living with Gloria and Dr. First. It was like having a home and parents, something she hadn't had in many years, or at all.

Perhaps the emergence from her last episode healed her on a deeper level and opened up her psychic powers. All she knew was that between the two of them, she was in a position to help

Joe more than anyone else. She would never be able to live with herself if she didn't at least try something, *everything*.

Luckily, she didn't have to explain all of this to Gloria. She had an uncanny knack for just understanding the subtleties and nuances of Angelica's heart and mind.

The tincture was ready. Angelica could smell it when she came into the living room. It hung in the air like wet leaves. It had a slightly pungent odor and a kind of a woody-clove like smell. Gloria explained the risks: potential hearing loss, inability to remember in sequence, a distorted perception of time, seizures, high fever, and God knows what else because of Angelica's unusual brain formation.

"There's no talking you out of this, is there?" Gloria asked, though she knew the answer.

"I want you to take the photo and hold it in your hands. Then I want you to place both hands on your heart, left over right," Gloria instructed her. The seriousness of her voice had a stunning quality like a solid and shiny ribbon. Angelica had never seen this shade of purple before, especially coming out of Gloria. She obeyed everything Gloria said to do.

Angelica lit candles, rubbed an ointment on her temples, bathed her feet in salt water, and then placed them flat on the ground while Gloria poured dirt from a plant on top of them. It almost seemed funny to her, like a high school sleepover party until she poured the hot water over the leaves and seeds she had gathered to make the infusion.

"Drink it very slowly," Gloria advised. "If you start to feel dizzy or as if you're floating stop drinking. I want you to tell me everything that comes into your mind or your inner vision. I'm going to tape record everything you say. Keep speaking until you can no longer speak."

The color of Gloria's voice vibrated. The bright violet ribbon intertwined with a solid, deep green hum like a pole or a large stalk. Angelica reached out and held Gloria's hand.

"I'll be right here the whole time," Gloria said. She tried to make her voice sound comforting. All Angelica saw were more colors and lines of concern.

Angelica sipped the tea slowly. It tasted sort of nutty and bitter. She grimaced.

"Slowly," Gloria advised.

The first segment to cross Angelica's inner vision was Graham's murder scene, but it replayed in slow motion with the wave to the crowd, the harsh burst of light to his face, the raw underside where his nose and his eyes used to be, the blanket over his head, the blur of the ambulance lights, the emergence of the African American paramedic from the ambulance a short while later, and then the strange, slow sound from his voice saying, 'A great man has died. Goodbye, Joe.'

Angelica reiterated the experience to Gloria.

"Ask your consciousness to go deeper," she said.

A series of images bombarded her, so quickly that she couldn't describe them all, but she tried.

"Lots of women in various stages of nudity, a funeral and Dr. First is there, Graham's face gets peeled back and the woman from the photo is in the room, Joe's being ravaged by flies underneath a burlap bag, the paramedic has this weird, high-pitched voice, 'A great man has died today,' Joe's strapped in a chair and he's writhing in pain. Joe is in the shower and I'm there, only it's my hologram. He makes love to it, sort of."

Angelica stopped talking for a moment. Gloria worried that she'd lost her. "Angelica?"

“I just, I was embarrassed for him,” she said.

Angelica tried to keep talking, but the random images stopped making sense and came at her too fast to reiterate: a redheaded kid eating sand, a dark, winding mountain road, the look in her eyes when she saw Joe in the third row

“That’s good, you’re definitely inside his life experience. Keep going and ask your spirit guides to show you what you can’t see from your eyes or Joe’s psyche,” Gloria said.

Angelica had her eyes closed at this point and though Gloria couldn’t see her, she could sense that Angelica had slipped further into the trance by the thin sound in her voice.

She tried to hum the blue thread back into her psyche, like the spiritual umbilical cord she used the last time, but it didn’t seem to be reaching Angelica. She was too far inside the experience to retrieve her.

“It’s bright, I’m in a hot spring, and the water makes me float. There are mountains all around and the sky is so beautiful!” Angelica said.

Gloria imagined the sky with her.

“I see him!”

“Who?”

“He’s with her, the woman from the photo only her hair is short now. Their little boy looks about four and the little girl looks about two. The girl looks like her mother. They’re walking down a cobblestone street and it smells like bread.”

Then she stopped and didn’t say another word. She was so far into the trance that she lost her ability to communicate.

Gloria kept talking to her, humming, singing, rubbing her feet, and anything else she could think of to rouse her back to a level of consciousness where she could talk. She tried to get Angelica to drink some water.

Then Angelica slithered to the floor like a deflated balloon. Gloria heard the flop and felt her hand slip away. The tea spilled and the ceramic mug crashed to the floor and broke into pieces. Gloria crawled over the broken ceramic teapot and grabbed the phone. She quickly called an ambulance and then Alvin as she found her way back to Angelica's head.

Angelica's breathing was shallow, her pulse weak, and her skin felt unnaturally cool. Gloria held Angelica in her arms until the ambulance arrived. Dr. First took the next plane back to Chicago.

Chapter 17

“Not guilty by reason of insanity,” Sturgis said. And so it began. After weeks of preparation and assembling a team made up of the best criminal defense attorneys in the country, Joe let Sturgis enter the ‘not guilty’ plea and structure the trial around his alleged insanity. Maybe I am insane, Joe thought to himself and this is what I get for tampering with the human condition.

It had been weeks since he last saw Angelica. Dr. First didn’t give him any reason, but Joe could tell by the concern in the corners of his eyes that something was wrong. Dr. First couldn’t come up with any real reason when Joe asked him why she hadn’t come back to see him. Joe couldn’t figure it out exactly, but he knew it wasn’t good. He feared that she had a setback from her visit with him and that Dr. First was protecting him from the truth.

They met in an anterior room at the courthouse each day before the trial. Pat discussed the progress of the case and prepped Joe on what he could expect that day. Sturgis often left the briefing sessions up to Pat while he met with the other Ivy League attorneys on their defense team.

Sometimes, Joe joined the bigger meetings, even though he found them tiresome and overwhelming. He preferred these quiet sessions with Pat. Joe regarded her as smart, savvy, and had a brotherly fondness for her. He respected her and not just because of all her fancy degrees. She had a heart and she came from a humble background like Joe’s. He hated the curt way in which Sturgis spoke to her, with disregard and a slice of superiority. Joe knew that Sturgis’s ‘old boy’ Southern upbringing and his reputation for being one of the sharpest and most powerful attorneys in the country meant he didn’t consider her an equal.

In some ways she wasn't his equal. She was smarter and more articulate. She was endearing and wise beyond her years. It made Joe uncomfortable to witness Sturgis's arrogance in action, especially because he liked Pat so much.

The prosecution had an impressive case. They even pulled one of their "thugs-on-tap" back from the witness protection program to testify that Joe Coyote paid him a million dollars to hire a hit man to kill Graham Gold. The man who actually pulled the trigger died in jail he claimed and gave the name of a snitch that was thought to have been killed while in prison. The witness had already been granted immunity for previous testimony regarding the same dead hit man, so it wasn't as if he had much to lose.

Joe had never seen the guy in his life, much less called him on the phone. The witness claimed that Joe confided in him about the public double situation and didn't give a specific reason why he wanted Graham murdered. *It was business.*

It was probably against industry standards to ask too many questions about a hitman or the hitman's agent. The prosecution's case squeaked with neat, clean angles. There was no way to prove that it wasn't Graham on the phone with the hitman's agent posing as Joe, especially since Graham had perfected the art of imitating Joe's voice so impeccably that even Sturgis couldn't tell them apart when one of them called.

But the haunting question remained, if Graham ordered the hit, then why did he take the bullet? He wasn't exactly the suicide type, especially once he fell in love with Olga.

As Sturgis pointed out, there was no way a jury would believe that a man who went to great lengths to get and keep the job of being Joe's public double would then hire his own hit

man and give away millions of dollars he'd embezzled ahead of time just so he could commit suicide on national television. That theory alone was enough to make the insanity defense stick.

Logically, the insanity approach was the conservative move, unless of course the jury decided that he was so nuts that they'd never let him lead his life outside an institution and without high levels of medication. The last thing Joe wanted was to be cooped up in a nuthouse with no life outside those walls. He would rather die.

"Do you think the insanity plea is the right way to go?" Joe asked Pat one day.

"It depends. In order to get you off, they're going to have to prove that you're really insane, too insane to be let out of an institution, but it keeps you out of jail and out of harm's way," she said. "So in that light, it's the most conservative approach."

"But you don't agree with it?"

"Our defense strategy still doesn't tackle the ultimate question on everyone's mind, 'who killed Graham Gold' it just skirts the issue and tacitly implies that you did but you can't be responsible because you're insane," she said.

"Who do you think killed Graham Gold?" Joe asked.

"I don't know. Probably someone from his past, an old score that didn't get settled, and he knew that he was eventually going to take a hit. He probably got tipped off and didn't want you to take it. Maybe someone found out about the arrangement and he knew his days were numbered. He didn't want you to take the bullet accidentally. If he and Sturgis hated one another as much as you've said, then maybe he did set this up as his last 'fuck you' to Sturgis knowing that Sturgis would tirelessly pursue him and he'd be dead all along. Of course you can't prove any of that in court and it would be too big of a gamble as a defense strategy," Pat said.

“You’re probably right,” Joe said.

“I know you’ve never asked me this, but for the record, I didn’t kill Graham,” Joe said.

“I know you didn’t,” She said. “That’s why I never asked.”

“How do you know?”

“Because you don’t have it in you. I’ve been around criminals and I’ve studied criminology enough to know that you’re not a killer. I can feel it in my gut,” she said.

“Thank you,” Joe said.

“And for the record, I also don’t think you are crazy,” she said.

“Why not?”

“I found the holograms,” she said.

Joe stopped moving. “Did Sturgis see them?”

“No,” she said.

“Good,” Joe said. Then he thought for a moment. “Why didn’t you tell him?”

“I didn’t want to take away from his paranoid schizophrenic theory, because he can get a lot more mileage on the insanity plea if he uses the cameras as surveillance devices,” she said.

“Good point.”

“And because Angelica Johnson asked me not to,” she said.

“Angelica saw the holograms?”

Pat nodded.

“Is that why she hasn’t come to see me?” he asked.

“She took ill again. Dr. First wouldn’t elaborate about it,” Pat said.

“Did she find all of them?” he asked.

She nodded.

“How did she take it?”

“She was startled at first, but by the time we left she seemed touched.”

“Touched, like ‘creeped-out’ or touched like emotional?” he asked.

“Emotional. She went home wearing one of your sweaters and she took a photo of you.

She thought I didn’t see it, but I didn’t say anything,” Pat said.

Joe’s spirits lifted. The day he saw Angelica he felt warm inside, peaceful. But in the few days since her visit, a cloud of melancholy swept through him. He buried himself in her music, but it wasn’t the same and he didn’t know why.

“Sturgis doesn’t know I brought Angelica to the house, so please don’t say anything about it,” she said.

“You don’t trust Sturgis, do you?” Joe asked.

“I respect him. He’s the great Sturgis Regan,” she said.

“I keep wondering if Sturgis killed Graham. I know it sounds ridiculous, and maybe I am really getting paranoid, but he would have rather have seen Graham hit by a train than walk off the job. Sturgis knew about our fight, that I fired him because I thought he slept with Angelica.”

“I’ve thought about that, but I don’t think Sturgis did it. He’s too smart and that’s kind of a magnanimous gesture, killing someone on your behalf. It’s not his style. There was no real reason for him to kill Graham,” she said.

“Unless Sturgis thought Graham was going to kill him,” Joe added. “I always had the feeling that he wanted to get Graham out of the way. The public double arrangement made him

nervous. And he always seemed uneasy about his unorthodox role in the situation as the attorney in charge of the contracts,” Joe said. “Maybe he was protecting his career or his reputation.”

“His role wasn’t that unorthodox. He was just doing his job as a lawyer at his client’s request. He would never get disbarred for it. The only person he had reason to kill was you. He would have gained control of your assets if you died. In fact, he did gain control of your assets, didn’t he?”

“Yes, but he gave most of my money away to charity as was stipulated in my will,” Joe said.

She looked away from Joe. This was not a conversation she should be having with him. Joe picked up on her trepidation.

“Believe me, I’ve had plenty of time to mull over that possibility. The only motive would have been money and he made more money off of me than he could spend in a lifetime,” Joe said. “It wouldn’t have been worth the risk. Besides, Sturgis loves me. We’ve been friends for years.”

“Greed knows no bounds. He’s a different breed. I’ve seen these blue blood types. There is no limit to the amount of money and power that will satisfy them. They’re the new fascists and they’re running the world, ruining it actually,” Pat said.

“Funny, Graham used to say the same thing about him.”

In the days that followed her drug-induced coma, Angelica remained quiet but alert. She opened her eyes, looked around, and answered questions with a nod. It wasn’t clear for several days whether or not she could speak.

Gloria fretted over her at the hospital. So did Dr. First. The throngs of reporters finally caught up to her and she was no longer insulated from them at Gloria's hideout. She hadn't been to her own home in weeks and now the locusts were descending upon her at the hospital. Even with the 24-hour security guard at her door, the reporters managed to get a story and even a couple of photographs.

Joe read about it in the paper that one of the guards slipped him. He was almost a week into the trial and his wits were already frayed. He called a meeting with Pat and Dr. First to find out exactly what happened at the house that day. Sturgis still didn't know about it.

"She seemed fine to me when she left. Almost happy," Pat said.

Dr. First told him about the drug-induced meditation that she convinced Gloria to put her into in order to tap into her psychic powers.

"They were looking for answers, something to do with your case. Gloria comes from a different culture and Angelica, well, we all know she's not made the same way we are. Those two are perfect together. I leave town for one night, Gloria digs into her magic potions handed down from generations and the next thing, Angelica's tripping on Peyote or Ayahuasca or whatever it was. Women!" Dr. First didn't even attempt to hide his frustration.

Joe could hardly believe it. A flurry of emotion blinded him. She'd risk her life to try and help me? How could he let anything happen to her?

"Did she learn anything?" Pat asked. They both looked at her.

"That she shouldn't take Peyote. It doesn't agree with her system," Dr. First said wryly.

"No, I'm serious. A lot of criminologists use psychedelics. I'm not sure the drugs were a good idea, but did they come up with anything?" she said.

“She’s still not able to speak very well and she says she can’t remember much. I’ve got a recording of their session,” Dr. First said.

“They recorded it. How Brilliant!’ Pat seemed almost too enthusiastic and didn’t mean to make light of Angelica’s condition.

Dr. First played the recording for them. Joe nodded in recognition of everything she said. These really were his visions. She did tap into his mind and his life experience. He felt numb with hope. Then the last part of the tape made him so startled that his arms crawled with goose bumps. Who was the man with Olga? He kept wondering.

“Maybe she plucked a vision out of your mind from the days when they were both alive. Perhaps the kids are some of the kids that were at the wedding,” Pat suggested.

“Can’t be. Olga had really long hair at her wedding,” Joe said.

“Maybe she cut it before she died,” Pat said.

“She died?” Dr. First asked.

“It said in Pat’s report. She died within a couple of weeks after Graham was killed,” Joe said.

“I know that’s what the report says and initially I took it as a coincidence or more possibly a hit. But now that I know it was Graham that died that day, either one of two things happened. Someone killed her for the same reasons they killed Graham, reasons we’ll probably never understand, or she faked her death to escape harm. If Angelica’s vision is current, then maybe Olga is still alive. By the time I got to the town where she lived, no one could tell me what really happened to her remains. They said her body had turned to ashes in the fire,” she said.

Joe looked at Dr. First. "It's true. Olga's alive. I can feel it."

"Angelica might be right," Pat said.

"You're both insane," Dr. First said.

"One of us has to go look for her," Pat said.

"I'll go," Joe offered.

"I'm supposed to testify in three days about his condition," Dr. First said.

"I can always find another expert witness," Pat offered.

"It's a wild goose chase predicated on a woman who was so high that she can still barely speak," Dr. First said. "Listen to yourselves. Listen to reason."

"Here's reason for you," Pat said in a stunningly determined tone. "If we don't come up with something concrete that proves that someone else could have killed Graham Gold, then Joe is going to take the blame and suffer the consequences. Best case scenario, they deem him not guilty by reasons of insanity and he spends the rest of his good years in an institution so doped up on medication that he probably won't be able to think or speak! Worst case scenario, he gets life behind bars and someone knocks him off after torturing him. Or, we go on one more wild goose chase and change the case midstream. Pick one."

Joe put his head down as if a blow had just landed on the back of the neck. It finally sank in that he was racing toward a brick wall. He'd never get to be with Angelica if they declared him insane.

"And you mustn't breath a word of this to Sturgis," Pat said. She made them promise.

"Joe, it's not that I wouldn't do everything in my power to help you, I would," Dr. First said.

“I insist on paying all your expenses,” Joe said.

“It’s not the money! I don’t even know what I’m looking for. A dead girl who isn’t really dead? How am I going to find her?”

“I don’t know,” Joe said. The despair in his eyes was too much for Dr. First to bear.

“I don’t want to get your hopes up. What if I come back with nothing?” Dr. First said.

“Then I’ll know in my heart for the rest of my life that you tried, that we turned over every stone we could.”

“I’ll leave in the morning,” Dr. First said.

CHAPTER 18

When he arrived back at the hospital later that morning, Dr. First panicked when he found Angelica's room empty and in disarray. He raced through the halls looking for some answers. One of the attending nurses stopped him in his frenzy before he could explain who he was.

"She's no longer with us," the nurse said.

"No longer with us! Why didn't anyone call me? I'm her doctor!" Dr. First ranted. For that moment he thought she had died.

"I mean she's no longer on this floor," the nurse said.

"Where is she? I demand that you tell me where she is." For a man who was usually so calm and in control of his emotions, his outburst startled him more than anyone else.

The nurse called a security guard. They had to wait to get authorization before he would take Joe to Angelica's new, undisclosed location, a private room on the children's oncology wing, the very same wing that was funded and named after Joe Coyote and was dedicated to his mother the day after Joe and Dr. First met in Zug, Switzerland when Joe delivered Angelica's Electric Laughter watch. Dr. First remembered that he had to race back to Chicago for the dedication ceremony.

Maybe it was just another coincidence. He wasn't the kind of man to think too much of coincidences or to believe in the 'signs from the universe' nonsense. He was a scientist. Olga was probably no more alive than Graham Gold. He was only going to humor Joe.

Angelica's room sprang to life with color. A huge painted rainbow on the wall next to her bed shimmered with the sunlight that bounced off of it and created an aura of color around

Angelica. She looked better in the small bed with the cloud headboard and the lollipop sheets. Her eyes glowed with a bright green and even her skin looked redder, unless it was from the reflection on the wall.

Gloria napped next to her bed in a small cot. Angelica waved him in and motioned for him to be quiet as she pointed at Gloria asleep next to her.

“What happened? You had me so worried,” he said as softly as he could. He could tell that Gloria was awake and just pretending to be asleep. He had slept with her enough to know the way her eyes fluttered inside her lids and the rhythm of her breathing when she slept.

“A photographer posed as a nurse and got through security. She trashed my room in a matter of seconds to get me angry so she could get a certain look on my face for her magazine. We had to call the police. It was ugly,” she said.

It was the most she had spoken to Dr. First in days. She almost sounded like her old self. He noticed the Electric Laughter watch on her wrist.

“You look better,” he said.

“I feel fine,” she said. “Completely recovered.”

They looked over at Gloria who pretended to wake up. She reached out for Alvin and smiled.

“I told you she’d be all right,” Gloria said.

“I’ve got to leave town for a few days,” Alvin said, avoiding the probing gazes from his psychically charged, favorite females.

“Where are you going?” Gloria asked.

“Angelica, I have to go away for a little while,” he said.

“Yes, I know. I’m coming with you,” Angelica said.

“And where do you think we’re going?” he asked.

“To Switzerland to look for Olga and the man she was with when I saw her in my hallucination. Maybe they know something about Graham, something that might save Joe.”

“How did you know that?” Dr. First asked.

“It’s her journey, Alvin. You’re just her guide, her caretaker,” Gloria explained.

“I’m just an idiot,” he said. There was no meanness in his voice, just a slight acquiescence.

“Angelica, I don’t know if you are well enough for the trip. I won’t be long and I doubt there’s anything to find over there,” he said.

“You won’t find anything, if you go without me. We both know that,” Angelica said.

As unconventional as her approach was, he couldn’t help but appreciate that she would go to great lengths to help Joe Coyote. He tried to rationalize his decision to let her accompany him. At least this way I’ll be able to keep an eye on her at all times.

He didn’t need to say a word. He could tell by her smile that she knew that he knew he would take her with him to Switzerland. She hadn’t been back to Europe since her Vienna debacle many years ago.

They left in the middle of the night. The Paparazzi were like rats. They don’t sleep and they were impossible to keep away from Angelica even with the added security guards posing as hospital staff.

Joe’s trial was scheduled to go live the next day and they were hungrier than usual for a breaking story. Word got out about her visit to Joe in prison. They had already jumped all over

the fact that he emerged from his isolation to see her perform with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. They dug up an inordinate amount of information about her past, most of it untrue. She was a prime target and in no condition to fend them off. Leaving the country was a great idea.

They staged a getaway. Dr. First made it look like she was in a coma and being transferred to another hospital. He was at her side as they wheeled her into the elevator and took her to the helipad on the roof. He had a grave look on his face. She kept her eyes and her mouth shut. The Paparazzi got their story and their photos. She got her escape.

It was late morning when they arrived in Switzerland. Dr. First hadn't been back in many months. That familiar feeling of crisp, clean air with the striking mountains in the distance cradled him into a sense of calm. At least he had the good fortune of going on a scavenger hunt in a country that he loved. Everything in Switzerland had the air of perfection. It was picturesque, meticulously clean, and even the crowded streets had a semblance of order. He loved the sense of predictability, even if it was somewhat staged. Life is never that organized.

They took the train through the Alps to Davos, a small town nestled in the mountains. They rented a car in nearby Klosters and drove to the clinic. Dr. First knew of it, since he was in the medical community though he had never been there.

They stopped along the way in a small village to get something to eat. Angelica was amazingly animated for someone recovering from a mental lapse due to a drug-induced coma. She ate mostly bread with jam and butter and sometimes cheese. She loved the smell of it, especially when it was warm. Breaking open a crusty roll, she'd bathe her face in the scented steam. He'd never seen her eat so voraciously.

“What’s the meaning of you and warm bread?” He asked, thinking back to their first escape in the bread truck.

“I don’t know. I just can’t get enough of it,” she said. She washed down her fifth roll with a creamy cup of liquid chocolate. Everything tasted better here. She couldn’t explain why.

The clinic looked like a chateau and had a resort feel. The individual cabins could have doubled for hotel accommodations, though each one was equipped with a mini surgery center and all the necessary equipment. It also had a wet bar, Jacuzzi, a massage table and huge television screens.

The doctor who had performed Graham’s surgery had died a year after Graham died. He was an elderly man and the records showed he died of liver cancer. It all looked legitimate. Angelica wasn’t interested in him. Even if he’d been alive, the surgeon would probably have known nothing about Olga’s personal life. The Swiss were known for having a tidy country where the people mostly kept to themselves, but in a cordial and civilized way.

They followed Pat’s notes and ended up in Guarda, Olga’s hometown before sunset. Since there was no hotel, a local widow put them up for the night. She seemed to fancy Dr. First, who even though he loved Gloria, didn’t mind being fawned all over.

Angelica went for a walk alone before dinner while Dr. First napped. She’d had plenty of sleep during the coma and the plane ride so she wasn’t the slightest bit tired. The thin, crisp mountain air rejuvenated her. Even though it was absorbingly quiet, there was an almost imperceptible sound that left a faint spray in the air. It was blue/white and had an effervescent quality that soothed her.

She followed Pat's diagrams and found the place where Olga's house was before it burned down. It was on the outskirts of town and at the edge closest to the mountains. Angelica imagined waking up everyday to the sound of the mountains subtly creaking and the birds chirping open the silence. She ached for Joe. She had hardly touched him with her hands, but still her whole body carried the memory of him. She couldn't explain it any better than that.

The house where Olga lived had been rebuilt. It looked similar to all the other storybook houses in the village. Angelica sat down on the stone steps that lead up to the front door. She looked out at the mountains. She heard giggling, like the sound of a child being tickled. She turned around quickly, but no one was there and there was no color or texture in the air where the sound should have been.

She walked around the house to the back alley and followed the narrow cobblestones until she smelled freshly baked bread. She went into the bakery and bought some bread. The old man behind the counter didn't speak English and she didn't speak Romanesh, the dialect in the region. She pointed at a brioche and he handed it to her. She went to pay but he waved her off.

He gave her a quizzical look and she knew he wanted to know why she was there.

"Olga," she said without him saying a word.

He waved at her and turned to walk away. She called after him.

"Two babies!" she said and made the motion of rocking a baby in her arms and she held up two fingers, like a peace sign.

"Olga," she said and pointed in the direction of Olga's old house.

"Not dead," she said and made a motion of slitting her throat and then nodded, 'no.' "Not dead, she has two babies." She repeated the baby-in-the-arms gesture and then the peace sign.

He looked at her for a moment. She couldn't read his eyes. Was he sad? Mad that she brought up the name? Was he going to hit her with his rolling pin? Instead he just nodded slightly and waved her off as he shuffled into the back behind the curtain that separated the rooms.

"Sir!" she called after him. He peaked his head out one more time. He looked as if he'd been holding back the tears.

"Is she here?" Angelica asked and pointed at the floor. He shrugged.

"Where is Olga?" she asked.

He looked at her and for a moment she thought he was going to say something.

"Please," she said softly.

"Not here," he said. And then he disappeared behind the curtain again. This time she heard another door close and the sound of him shuffling up the stairs, which appeared in the bakery like little sad puffs of smoke.

Angelica could hardly wait to tell Dr. First who seemed slightly less enthusiastic than she was.

"That means she's alive! The old guy so much as said so," she said.

"But he didn't say where she could be, did he?"

"Well, no. He just said, 'not here' as in she's not here anymore but she's someplace else."

"Maybe he was thinking heaven," Dr. First said.

"No I can tell these things. She's alive."

"Get some rest, Angelica. It's big work chasing ghosts," he said.

"You're not being very supportive," she argued.

“I’m sorry. It’s just that someone should be the voice of reason and it hasn’t been you or Gloria or Joe or Pat,” he said.

“What did Joe say when you told him you were taking me with you?” Angelica asked.

“He didn’t say anything because I didn’t tell him,” he said.

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to get his hopes up,” Dr. First said.

“No, that’s not right. You *do* want to get his hopes up. That’s all he’s got left. That’s all any of us have, really. Think about it. Without his hope you might as well put him in the chair and flip the switch.”

“They don’t do that anymore.”

“You know what I mean.”

It was the first time she ever questioned or confronted Dr. First. Until then he had been some kind of all-knowing Guru. He looked hurt that she stood up to him.

They spent another day in Olga’s village and found nothing to go on. The old man never opened up the bakery the rest of the time they were there. He didn’t answer his door when she brought Dr. First to see him. She started to wonder whether the old man existed at all.

She felt as if she’d arrived at a dead end and questioned her journey. In super-rational moments it looked like folly. What if Olga really was ‘not there’ because she was dead? What was she doing back in this part of the world anyway?

They pulled out of town in their rental car early in the morning two days after they arrived. The bakery, the town and the old man would soon be a memory, which was probably all that Olga was, she thought. For a moment she had the sensation that someone was watching her.

She turned around as the car passed the bakery. She could have sworn the curtains in the second story window above the store had moved.

Angelica insisted on going to Vienna before they returned back to the states. If she couldn't confront Joe's ghosts, she might as well confront her own. Dr. First didn't argue. The town where Olga used to live bordered Austria and it wasn't that far from Vienna.

She just wanted to hear the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra play. It wasn't about her this time. It was about the music, *how she missed their music*.

She walked through the front doors of the Vienna Opera Hall, the Musikverein Wien with its Romanesque arches, red exterior and stately eighteenth century architecture. Greatness came to life in those halls. The spirits of Mozart, Brahms, Beethoven, Strauss, and so many others still lingered in the gilded halls, some with enormous columns and expansive, dome-shaped ceilings. Just as Italy spawned artists and statesmen, Vienna gave rise to the world's greatest composers, whose souls rang out in this great building.

"Are you all right?" Dr. First asked.

"I'm more than all right. I'm not afraid anymore. I used to be so afraid that my condition would overwhelm me and swallow me up. I thought everything and anything would harm me somehow. But that's just the way life is. It's overwhelming and powerful and dangerous and exciting and beautiful and heartbreaking and I'm so grateful I'm not missing it," she said.

She stared at the multi-tiered stage with the enormous columns behind it, as if they were the thick, round thighs of some ancient God. The musicians perched their instruments in position and waited for the cue from the conductor. He nodded and they cracked open the silence with movements so precise and passionate that their bodies became extensions of their instruments.

Angelica felt the awe that comes with being a part of a truly inspired performance. She closed her eyes and imagined her heart opening to receive it.

The music washed over her and inside of her. Waves of color swallowed her up and covered her with textures and colors. She saw herself spinning inside silky ribbons of blues and golds and greens and reds that wound around her body, unraveling with each note.

She surrendered to it and let the music reverberate deep inside of her so that the liquid colors entered her veins and pulsed through her body. Her brain teetered on overload and she welcomed it. The thrill of actually *becoming* the music took hold of her.

Tears of joy and gratitude spilled out like silver droplets. How lucky she was to be alive and to experience the concert in a way that most people would never know, to *see* and *feel* and *be* the music. She let the music carry her and became another thread in its tapestry, another thread in this big fabric of life.

She thought about Joe Coyote, how he sat in the third row and surrendered to her music, to her, and how he intertwined his energy with hers forever. How brave he must have been to connect his heart like that without knowing where it would lead.

For the first time she prayed, to God or to her Guardian Angels or to her Spirit Guides or to whomever watched over her. *Please take care of Joe* she pleaded. *Please help me help him.* She closed her eyes again and imagined that the music was part of her prayer as an offering to the powers that be.

She felt drained but elated when they left the Opera House. They climbed into a horse drawn carriage. Dr. First had to be lifted up by the driver. He wasn't a young man in body, just in his verve for life.

These past few months had aged him physically. Angelica could see it in his face and in his posture. She covered them with a wool blanket in the back of the cab and held his hand as the carriage strutted through the city on the way to their hotel.

She loved Vienna, it was charming and classy and quaint and the architecture suggested nobility and storybook timelessness. It was another world, a world she loved deeply.

They arrived back at their hotel. The Concierge had arranged a table for them near the window of the dining room. She looked out into the shadows of the night. During the day, the view unfolded with an expanse of green grass and synchronized fountains. At night, the darkness had an ominous personality. Angelica suddenly had the feeling that someone was watching her in the distance.

She reproached herself, trying to convince herself that she was probably just overly emotional from the concert. Vienna held so many memories for her, so much significance. There were ghosts of her past everywhere.

Still, it was a feeling she couldn't shake, one that made her skin feel prickly and slightly raw. She missed Gloria. She longed for Joe.

Back in her room she couldn't sleep. She heard voices in Dr. First's room next door and called him. He listened to the audio transcripts from the Joe Coyote trial that he streamed down from a news web site. The judge hadn't allowed television cameras in the courtroom, but compromised and allowed someone with audio. Or maybe it was a bootleg. Angelica went to his room.

"I just want to hear his voice," she said.

“You probably won’t hear his voice because he’s not on the witness stand. It’s just Sturgis and some Psychiatrist, my replacement.”

They listened to the Psychiatrist ramble on for several moments as he explained the symptoms of various mental illnesses he thought Joe might have. Dr. First shook his head.

“It’s a good thing I’m not there. I never would have been this convincing. I don’t think Joe has any of this crap that he’s talking about,” Dr. First said. “Although I was supposed to talk about the neurological functions of his brain, which doesn’t necessarily make a person insane, just different.”

“I don’t think he’s so convincing. His voice is all green, not an honest, forest green but a chartreuse, insincere green, nuclear green,” she said.

Dr. First nodded. He watched her closely as the psychiatrist finished his testimony and Sturgis asked the next question.

“Thank you, Dr. Weloman. Your testimony is most enlightening. Could you please repeat your specific diagnosis again for the jury now that they understand the underlying symptoms of these types of mental illnesses,” Sturgis said.

Angelica’s face turned white and she started to shake. She looked horribly distraught.

“Who’s voice was that?” she asked.

“Why? Was something wrong with his voice?” Dr. First asked.

“Something wrong! There’s so much insincerity in his voice that I could hardly listen to it. Every word was encased in a slick, greenish-gray slime. I never want to meet the person who belongs to that voice. He’s more insincere and dangerous than anyone I’ve ever met! Who is he?”

“That is Sturgis Regan, Joe’s Lead Council for the case.”

“He’s the one in charge of Joe’s future? We have to do something,” she said. “He’s going to destroy Joe all over again. There’s nothing sincere or honest about this man. Nothing. I can see it in his voice.”

Neither of them slept all night. Angelica couldn’t think of any other ways to try to find Olga and at this point, she doubted that Olga was still alive, vision or no vision. She focused all her energy on helping Joe get rid of Sturgis.

She called Gloria and told her about her reaction to hearing Sturgis’s voice. Gloria promised to visit Joe in the morning and tell him about it and ask him to consider changing legal council. At the same time, Dr. First phoned Pat and explained the situation to her. Angelica wanted to talk to Joe personally, but it wasn’t possible. She arranged for them to take the corporate jet back to Chicago the following day.

Somewhere in the blur of the following day she got a phone call in her room. She quickly answered it and a man’s voice said, “I tracked you down from the rental car in Guarda. Luckily, he used the same credit card to pay for the car rental as he did for your hotel in Vienna. I need to speak with you right now,” the man said.

“Who are you and what’s this about?” she asked.

“I think you know what this is about,” he said and instructed her to meet him in the lobby lounge in fifteen minutes. He described what he was wearing and the remote corner where he’d be sitting.

“I think you’ll recognize me,” he said. Then he hung up and the phone went dead.

CHAPTER 18

Graham waited in the far corner of the lobby of Angelica's hotel in Vienna. He had rehearsed the meeting in his mind for years, what he would say, and how he would say it. Now that it was moments away, his mind wandered in random directions, mostly back to times he spent with Joe.

The night he married Olga, Joe gave him a gift that he never forgot. He gave him the kind of friendship he'd never known before. Joe insisted that Graham cancel the surgery and live with his new bride instead of becoming his public double. He even offered to pay him double his agreed upon fee. It wasn't the money, it was the sincerity in his voice. He genuinely wanted Graham to be happy. That was it, no ulterior motive. What Graham couldn't tell him was that they would both probably be dead within a matter of a year or two and Graham couldn't back out for both their safety's sake.

Angelica arrived at the remote corner of the lounge with Dr. First. Graham turned around and faced her, his eyes moist, and his expression tense. She looked confused, and then nearly fainted when she figured out who he was. Graham grabbed a chair and rolled it behind her so she could sit down instead of fall down.

"I'm sorry about what happened that night between us," Graham said to Angelica.

"That night?"

"I didn't know it was you at first, but when I figured it out, I took the opportunity and ran with it. I had to do something to get Joe mad at me in order to get this whole thing in motion and it just worked out that way. I never meant to harm you," He said.

Graham hadn't planned on opening with that line, it just sort of came out.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“I’m Graham Gold. My birth name is John Jones, but I changed it legally because I thought it was a catchier name. Who’d remember a guy named John Jones, you know what I mean?” he said. “I wanted to be an actor.”

Angelica could barely breathe. The man sitting in front of her was the man who she was naked with that night, thinking it was Joe Coyote. His voice filled the air with the same colors and textures as he had in the penthouse, only this time there was a deep, navy blue that underlined everything he said. It carried a texture and a hue that made her feel as if he had gained some wisdom and that he was telling her the truth.

“I don’t understand,” she said.

“I’m going to video tape this conversation so we’ll have a record of it, in case anything happens to me,” he said.

“Anything happens to you?” Angelica asked.

“You are Graham Gold,” Dr. First said.

“Dr. First, I also owe you an apology as well. I was purposefully rude to you the last time I saw you at that conference. I hope you understand that it wasn’t personal. I could never have kept up the charade with you and I feared that I’d blow my cover. You knew him too well and he loved you too much. I needed to create distance between you two in order to move forward with this plan. I apologize if I offended you,” Graham said.

Angelica and Dr. First listened with rapt attention as Graham revealed the story within the story.

Ten years ago, Graham met Sturgis for the first time. That was two months before Graham met Joe for the first time. It had all been arranged from the start. Graham's prison term had been mysteriously reduced to five months from three years, time he had already served. He figured someone on the police force pulled some strings. Or maybe it was time off for good behavior. He laughed at that idea. Most likely, someone needed him for a job on the outside.

It had been a short ride to the bottom of the American Dream for him. At fifteen his mother died unexpectedly from a food-borne bacteria that invaded her body, leaving him to fend for himself when he wasn't even old enough to drive. He couldn't even afford the ambulance that took her to the hospital the night she died. They sent her home with what they said was probably a bad case of stomach flu or food poisoning because she didn't have health insurance. He found her dead the next morning on the floor of the bathroom. He didn't have a father or any other family members. It was just the two of them. Graham didn't even have money for a proper burial.

When his mother was still alive, they used to dream about what it would be like to have money. They could buy grapes at the grocery store even when they weren't on sale, new shoes for the winter, and plenty of glamour products for his mother. She'd read fashion magazines at the nail and waxing shop where she worked as a receptionist for minimum wage, no benefits. She learned about choosing the perfect lipstick, new forms of birth control, libido enhancers, the latest in skin care, how to please a man, which belly ring to choose, and when to call the police if she suspected she was being raped.

She also read that male models and actors earned an exorbitant amount of money, if they made it. That's when she decided that her ticket to paradise was the modeling and acting career

of her teenage son, John Jones. Graham Gold was the name he invented to infuse his persona with prestige. He and his mother sat up one night devising the perfect stage name. He liked graham crackers and he always wanted more gold. The new name had a nice ring to it. Being a celebrity was mostly predicated on illusion anyway.

Graham soon found that although he was handsome, he wasn't handsome enough. He lacked poise, had no acting training, and wasn't comfortable yet in his quickly growing adolescent body. His mother spent money she didn't have on headshots and audition classes. He got an agent who in turn got him some low paying print work, which didn't even cover the cost of the photos they sent out that he had to pay for. He tried out unsuccessfully for roles in the school plays. He was well liked by his peers, but he wasn't a standout on stage. He was just a poor kid with a big dream.

After his mother died, he jumped from foster home to foster home for the next couple of years, never finding a place where he could comfortably lay his head and grow into his future. There were incidents of sexual abuse and starvation at some of the Foster homes, so he ran away. Graham managed to stay out of trouble, finish high school, and pursue his acting career but barely. There were time he lived on the streets, slept on a park bench, and occasionally in a homeless shelter when it got dangerously cold outside. With no money for college and no real prospects for the future, it seemed like he had only two choices, the army or the police academy.

With his penchant for drama, he decided to become an undercover cop. It seemed exciting, challenging, and sort of like acting but without all the rejection. It didn't take long for him to distinguish himself for undercover work. He was the perfect candidate since he had no family, nothing to lose, and he wasn't afraid to venture into the dark side of society. He lasted

almost fifteen years as an undercover cop, never forming true attachments, never really trusting anyone.

The dark side of his job got a little too tempting for him and under the guise of working undercover, he became an actual drug dealer. The money was better. He told himself that he'd just do it until he could bank enough money to get his acting career off the ground, but things got ugly quickly. He blew his own cover and tried to regain the loyalty of both sides, or either side. He ended up in jail and off the police force. He gave up information on some of the drug dealers to shorten his sentence. All he wanted was a new identity and a second chance when he got out, if he got out.

Graham was ripe for the picking, the perfect candidate for Sturgis's larger plan. Graham was the same height as Joe. He had the same eye color and even though he had a broader build, he had the same stature as the one-of-a-kind Joe Coyote. It all fell into place. What started as an idea became a reality and he had all the pieces in place with this desperate man.

They met in the Lincoln Park zoo one day in early spring. Sturgis wore a Burberry overcoat and some designer suit. His Italian leather shoes got muddy as they walked toward the Conservatory just outside of the zoo. Graham remembered how unfazed Sturgis was that they were obviously ruined. He probably has a closet full of them at home, he reasoned. Graham wore a pair of faded jeans, a tee shirt and a leather jacket he bought with the money he got upon his release from prison. He still had nowhere to live and no one to call.

They entered the Conservatory and the humid air felt thick enough to take a bite out of. It was early morning, and the Conservatory was not open yet so he and Sturgis had the place to

themselves. Sturgis's thick silver hair was slicked back with a greasy product that repelled the moisture so it beaded up on his mane like a web.

Graham had trouble looking at him in the eye from the start. At first he thought it was because Sturgis was obviously a powerful man, but Graham had been around powerful men before and never flinched, even around the gun-happy drug dealers. Graham had trouble looking at Sturgis because he was the worst kind of power monger. He had no soul, no compassion, and Graham could see only greed in his eyes. Sturgis really didn't care about anyone or anything in the world except himself. He had all the trappings of a contemporary Renaissance man. He was cultured, worldly, educated, extremely connected politically, athletic, handsome, and he knew how to dance or talk about the opera. Women loved him. His colleagues revered him. What he lacked was the ability to connect with another human being and actually care about someone. Sturgis traveled amongst the elite, the ultra-wealthy, and the new rulers of the world who dealt in power and money and very expensive toys. Sturgis belonged to the new American royalty and only more money could secure his place and his ascent to the top.

Sturgis and Graham walked along the rows of tropical plants, surrounded by huge palms and gnarly vines, white hibiscus flowers and a lipstick red, cascading bougainvillea. The jungle-like habitat felt like a dream as long as he didn't look outside at the cold and dreary March weather that plagued the real world around them. Graham wondered how many people would sleep outside that night because they had no where to go, old men, little kids, pregnant teenagers.

Sturgis explained the situation under the guise of concern for Joe Coyote. Sturgis was afraid of losing Joe, or so he said. He told Graham that he thought Joe wouldn't be able to withstand the pressure of the media and their relentless invasion in his life. Because Joe's mind

was so brilliant he wasn't cut out for all the pressure and insanity that came with the territory of becoming an instant billionaire.

The plan was for Graham to undergo extensive plastic surgery so he could look exactly like Joe. He'd take the edge off of Joe's social demands, leaving Joe to have some peace and quiet so he could invent his next big gift to humanity, whatever that was going to be.

It was all done under the premise that Sturgis had Joe's best interest and well being at heart. But since Sturgis didn't have a heart, it was really being done in Sturgis's best interest, which was the insatiable yearning for more money and more power. There would never be enough of whatever he pursued. Graham knew that eventually, he would be called upon to masquerade as Joe for Sturgis's convenience, help transfer control of the company to him, and it would all boil down to money. It always did. Graham was right.

Sturgis talked about it methodically, he had ironed out all the details. Graham was never to tell Joe that it had all been pre-arranged. To do so, would terminate the entire agreement and Graham would be back in jail, or worse. Graham didn't need any explanation about what 'or worse' really meant.

Joe was very sensitive, Sturgis explained. He needed to believe that the idea for a public double came from him or from Graham or from some conversation that they had. Graham had to accomplish this seamlessly and not arouse suspicion. Joe's brilliant mind teetered on the verge of paranoia already.

Graham understood the whole situation perfectly. Sturgis wanted to create Joe's public double for his own use, probably for ways to get control of Joe's fortune and he didn't want Joe to know about it. Once all the papers were signed, in front of witnesses, etc. There would be no

need for either of them. Then Sturgis would kill him and then Joe. Sturgis would be king of the world, standing on his and Joe's dead bodies.

Graham agreed to the arrangement. He didn't have any other options. He knew Sturgis was responsible for getting him out of jail early. He even told him that he expunged and erased his jail time from Graham's criminal record. Graham could only imagine how powerful he really was and knew that he was being bought for a price. Graham's early release from prison would send a message to everyone in his previous world that he must have given up some significant information in exchange for his freedom. The last thing he needed was to be known as a rat, especially when he wasn't one. He might as well have signed his own death certificate that day or change his face completely so no one would know it was him. Sturgis saw it as a 'win/win', which meant he owned Graham from that moment on. Slavery wasn't dead after all. It didn't surprise him when he later learned that Sturgis grew up in the South, a descendent of a plantation owner. Cruelty must be in his DNA.

Sturgis knew Graham's history when he approached Graham that first day. Graham could tell by the way he walked that he knew he had him. Sturgis had an air of mastery that went beyond arrogance. Graham understood that if he declined the offer, he would end up dead sooner rather than later. He had no choice, really.

Graham surmised that he would probably end up dead anyway, but at least he'd have had the chance to take one last big ride and live a life he could only dream about. He'd have lots of money, power, women, and the world would be at his fingertips. It was the role of a lifetime and the last role he'd probably ever play.

Graham saw the possibilities unfold that first day and he figured it all out, but like a train wreck, he didn't know how to stop it. Graham knew Sturgis's plan without having to be told what he was being hired for. He saw it all, except for the final plan. That took a little brainstorming with Olga during the days at the clinic, starting with the night they got married.

As exciting as it was, the proposition made him jittery. The last time he went undercover, he posed as a small time drug dealer in order to infiltrate a major drug ring and ended up a junkie and almost dead. He switched sides somewhere in the middle and started making big money, until he got caught. Graham always had a problem with authority, or maybe it was just that he hated the idea of being poor for the rest of his life. His policeman's salary would never compare with the lavish lifestyle of a drug dealer. Materialism won out over morality and who could blame him? He was spoon fed the need to consume from an early age just like everyone else, and never once was he bombarded with images of 'doing the right thing.' He knew a flashy car or a real cool pair of sunglasses wouldn't bring him happiness, he just didn't want to be miserable without them.

"We need to keep you alive and take you back to Chicago to testify in person at Joe's trial," Dr. First said.

"Dr. First, I've built a very nice life for myself here. Olga and I have two children – Sophie is two and Joey is four." Graham stopped talking as his eyes filled up with tears.

"I know you'd be risking a lot to come to the States, but it's the only way to save Joe," Angelica said.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," Graham said.

CHAPTER 19

Gloria stood in the visitation booth with her palms pressed against the glass, reminiscent of the way Angelica stood the last time she visited Joe in jail. Gloria put her ear to the glass and listened as a muffled sound indicated that a door opened and a man walked in. She felt her way to the chair and then found the voice opening with her fingertips. She leaned toward it.

“Joe?” She asked.

In the hesitating silence that followed she sensed his disappointment that Angelica wasn't the visitor.

“Gloria! How are you?”

“I'm fine,” she said.

“How is Angelica?”

“She's fine. She couldn't be here so she sent me,” she said.

“Is everything all right?” He asked, concerned about the answer

“She's fine. Physically, she's doing much better, but she's really worried about you.”

“Can I see her?” Joe asked eagerly.

“When she gets back. She's in Europe with Dr. First,” Gloria said.

Gloria shared Angelica's reaction to hearing Sturgis's voice and her promise to relay this information to Joe.

“She's got a gift for seeing things beyond the physical realm. I'm not just talking about her Synesthesia,” she said.

“Yes, I know. People with her condition also have an inordinately high incidence of psychic phenomenon,” he said.

“She wanted me to tell you that you must not let him stay in charge of your future. I’m sorry if this frightens you, but it’s not too late,” she said.

“Let’s hope not,” Joe said.

The guard came in to escort Gloria out of the room. Joe leaned into the slots in the wall.

“Gloria! Wait. I never got to thank you for saving my life,” he said.

“Saving your life?” she asked.

“The note from Angelica that you delivered that night. It got me through the darkest time in my life. Without it, I would have lost myself completely. Thank you, Gloria,” he said.

“You’re welcome, Joe. May God and your angels bless you and keep you,” she said.

Joe spoke with Pat before approaching Sturgis. He asked her to be his lead council. She was completely taken aback.

“Angelica heard Sturgis’s voice and confirmed what you and I have thought all along, even if we never said it out loud. Sturgis cannot be trusted,” Joe said.

“But changing lead council so far along in the trial will draw suspicion to your mental state. He’ll never give it up, especially not to me,” she said.

Joe called a meeting in the judge’s chambers with Pat, Sturgis, and Judge Steeple, a wiry man in his sixties with coffee-stained teeth that splayed out in every direction. The judge seemed sympathetic to Joe’s cause all along, though Joe couldn’t help but wonder how much Sturgis had greased his palms. Sturgis was a man who thought of everything and covered all his bases. The judge didn’t look crooked or sleazy, just human. Sturgis could have offered to donate a large sum of money to his favorite charity or pay for his children’s college education. Nothing was out of his reach.

Joe announced his decision to reappoint Pat Rodgers as his lead council and asked Sturgis to step down from the position. When the judge asked why and under what grounds, Joe stammered his explanation.

“So let me get this straight, Angelica Johnson, the woman who you came out of seclusion for heard a recording of Sturgis’s voice on the Internet and sent her blind friend, the one who sat next to you during Angelica’s concert to tell you that Angelica didn’t like the colors of his voice and told you to reappoint another lead council. Is that correct?” he asked.

“Sort of,” Joe said.

“What part did I miss?” the judge asked.

“Her psychic powers,” Joe said. “People with Angelica’s rare brain condition are known to have strong psychic powers.”

The judge looked at Sturgis. Joe caught the look and knew his fate was sealed.

“I’m not crazy. This is real,” he said sounding nuttier every second. Pat put her head down. She knew what was coming. The judge turned to Sturgis with a reprimanding glare.

“If this is some kind of antic to support your insanity plea,” he began.

Sturgis emphatically denied it. For once he wasn’t lying.

Joe protested. “I’m in charge of my life. This is my trial and I decide to change lead council. Sturgis knew nothing about it. Why would I tell him if I was going to fire him?”

The judge turned to Pat and asked her if she knew about the purpose of this meeting before they arrived. She admitted that she did. The judge and Sturgis exchanged another look.

“I assume you are well aware of the defendant’s agitated state of mind,” he asked.

“I’m aware of his agitation, anyone would be *agitated* in his situation,” she said. “I don’t think he’s insane if that’s what you’re insinuating.”

The judge glared at her, then he looked at Sturgis.

“Your honor, I apologize for the disruption. Perhaps the stress of the trial is too much for my client. I’d like to present a document that was signed by him, which states I will be retained as lead council regardless of his state of mind. This was signed previously and under the guidance of a psychiatrist whom we used for evaluation and consultation purposes. He deemed that my client was of sound enough mind to make this decision at the time. He predicted that something like this may happen,” Sturgis said. His self-congratulatory tone ignited Pat’s temper.

“Oh, so now he’s of sound mind when it’s convenient for you!” she blurted out. The judge forbade her from further outbursts, but she could tell that she planted a seed of doubt in his mind about Sturgis.

Sturgis handed him the papers, the signed document, and the report from the psychiatrist.

“Joe, do you remember signing this?” she whispered. The judge looked up and glared at her.

“I may have. There was so much to sign,” he said.

“Very well, under the law you’ll remain lead council for now. Joe, if you’d like to replace him in the future, I suggest you have a sound argument, one that’s documented.” He dismissed them. Joe felt his body grow heavy, as if his veins were filled with lead.

They weren’t even down the hall when Sturgis turned to Pat and told her that the contents of her desk would be delivered to her home. She wouldn’t be allowed back in the office and if

she came near Joe, he'd have an injunction against her and start proceedings to have her disbarred.

Sturgis took Joe by the arm and lead him away from Pat flanked by armed guards. The elevator door closed and she caught a final glimpse of Joe's anguished face. From then on, Sturgis wouldn't allow him to receive any visitors.

That day in court was particularly excruciating for Joe. Dr. First, Angelica, and now Pat were all missing. He caught a glimmer of a red scarf in the gallery and his spirits lifted a little knowing that Gloria managed to get in somehow. The trial was closed to the public at the judge's request, though the audio portion was still broadcast live each day. Joe suffered through the blatantly untrue testimony of some mob-connected hit man who claimed that Joe called him and hired him to kill Graham.

"How do you know it wasn't Graham who called you and said he was me? Our voices were identical," Joe blurted out.

The judge banged his gavel. All eyes were on Joe but he didn't care. He had nothing to lose. Sturgis gave him a short reprimand and explained that they would cross-examine the witness when the prosecution was through with him.

The trial continued. The witness, a fat man with fingers as thick as sausages continued to elaborate on the phone call and the amount of payment for the hit. Pure lies.

Joe lost his wits again.

"That's not true! This man lies and kills for a living. What makes you think he's going to tell the truth now?" Joe stood up in a rage. He finally understood that this could be how it all ends. He was getting buried alive each day in this courtroom. He just couldn't take it anymore.

Sturgis physically pulled him down to his chair by the elbows. The connection created by the force of his hands around Joe's arms made Joe recoil. Angelica was right. This man is my worst enemy and he's in charge of my life. He suddenly saw the General's face in place of Sturgis's for an instant. There was never an international terrorist threat. Sturgis probably hired him to break Joe.

"One more outburst and the defendant will be forced to leave the courtroom," the judge said.

Joe sat quietly from then on. He tuned out the witness's testimony and racked his brains trying to come up with another plan, some strategy that would take him off this course. He put his head down and hid his face in his hands. The court artist drew a rendition of him like this that appeared in the papers across the world.

Angelica unfolded the Herald Tribune to the image of Joe with his head buried in his hands and her heart ached. She sat in the back of a private plane with Dr. First and Graham. The tape of his confession had been duplicated and a hard copy was sent to the States, while the digital copy had been secured on several servers for safe keeping.

Dr. First had been trying to reach Pat on her work phone, but it was disconnected. He knew something was awry when his email messages to her work address bounced back. The receptionist at the law office finally told him that Pat was no longer working there. Gloria informed him of her conversation with Joe about Sturgis. He could only imagine that things hadn't gone well and decided not to tell Angelica right away.

Dr. First finally reached Pat on her private cell phone. She told him the whole story about the events in the judge's chambers. He sent her to the secure server with Graham's confession and waited for her to calm down after she learned the truth.

"But a video confession isn't admissible in a court of law," she said. "Because they can be edited and falsified."

"I know. That's why we're bringing him home with us," Dr. First said. Pat asked to speak to Angelica.

"You're my hero," Pat told her.

"I'm not," Angelica said. "Graham is the real hero."

"He'll be my hero tomorrow. Today, it's you," Pat said.

Early the next morning, Pat arrived at the courthouse before the judge and even before Sturgis. She waited for the judge in the anterior room outside his chambers. At first he wouldn't agree to see her since she had been relieved from her duties on the Joe Coyote case.

"I knew you'd say that, so please consider the following documentation that I've got on my lap top as a sufficient submission for reconsideration of lead council on behalf of my client, Joe Coyote who has retained me as a separate advisor and not as part of his defense team," she said. The determination in her voice inspired the judge to take a quick look.

They went into his chambers and closed the door. She opened the laptop and shared Graham's confession, which streamed out over and onto his desk. The judge stared in amazement.

"I can't admit this as evidence," he said.

“Of course not. But it is enough to appoint me lead council at Joe Coyote’s request and let me put the witness on the stand. He should be landing in the area within the hour,” she said. The judge shook his head in amazement.

“Can you be prepared by the time we reconvene after the lunch break?” he asked.

“Yes! Thank you!” she said. She could hardly breathe. She tried to compose herself and pack up her laptop while profusely thanking the judge.

“Nice work, counselor. Joe Coyote’s a lucky man to have you as his ally,” he said.

“Thank you, your honor.”

The next few hours went by in a blur. Since Sturgis had Joe so tightly reigned in, there was no way she could get to him to explain what was happening.

It was just as well. She needed every moment to prepare her case and to work with Graham. She had to make sure that no one knew, especially not Sturgis. The element of surprise was on her side. They were scheduled to present closing arguments to the jury in the afternoon.

She worried about Joe. The shock alone from seeing Graham walk into the courtroom could be enough to put him over the edge. Angelica assured her that he would be fine, she’d see to that.

While Pat worked with Graham and Dr. First preparing for the afternoon testimony, Angelica planted herself in the courtroom at the perfect angle so Joe could see her most of the time if he turned around slightly.

Joe caught her eye immediately and thought about his holograms of her how he’d stand at the perfect angle by the window so he could *see* her instead of *through her*. He wondered if she was really there in the courtroom or if she was just another figment of his imagination.

Angelica gave him a look of encouragement and hope. It was an expression that even he hadn't managed to program into her projected image. *She was really there.* She held up the artist's rendering of him with his head in his hands and drew a line through it on the diagonal. He smiled.

Sturgis looked over and saw what he was smiling at. He tipped his head in Angelica's direction and acknowledged her for keeping Joe calm. She couldn't even look at Sturgis.

Angelica and Joe spent the morning in one another's gaze. She told him stories with her eyes and comforted him with a feeling of brightness. She was careful not to think about the afternoon plans too much since she wasn't quite sure how much Joe Coyote would be able to pick up from her thoughts.

Instead, she held the vision in her mind of the two of them together. He couldn't explain it, but by lunchtime he felt energized and ready for anything. Hope pulsed through his body like a drug as he played Angelica's cello music loudly in his head. Sturgis talked about the closing argument with him at the break, but he just looked at him numbly. The trial commenced for the morning.

After the lunch recess, the judge called Sturgis to the bench along with the District Attorney. He informed them that Sturgis was relieved of his duties as lead council and that he granted Joe's earlier request to replace him with Pat. Sturgis protested vehemently and went to the edge of threatening the judge with a mistrial.

"Duly noted," the judge said as he pounded the gavel and called the court to session.

Sturgis returned to the side of the courtroom where Joe sat. "Did you know about this?" he clamored.

Joe had never seen him so angry, so red-faced, and distraught. He wouldn't even look at Joe as he packed up his papers in a huff. Joe looked over at Angelica who was now accompanied by Dr. First and Gloria. He felt happy to see them, but horribly confused. Pat walked into the courtroom. Sturgis got up to leave.

"The court requests that you remain in the courtroom," the judge said to Sturgis. Three armed guards stepped toward him.

"What the hell is going on here?" Sturgis burst out.

Pat walked up to the bench and mustered up all of her boldness.

"Your honor, the defense would like to call its next witness," she turned and winked at Joe who looked totally confused.

Graham walked in the courtroom flanked by two armed guards. It took Joe a couple of moments for it all to sink in. Graham had had another round of plastic surgery so his face had the features of both of their faces, Joe's existing face and Graham's pre-Joe face. Their eyes met and he knew it was really Graham, alive and well and standing five feet away from him.

Joe stood up and started to cry. Graham walked toward him and the armed guards looked at the judge who nodded his approval. The two men embraced. The courtroom was silent. Finally, the judge ordered the trial to begin.

Pat wiped her tears as Graham was sworn in. Joe was still in shock. Graham began his testimony with the last thing he said to Joe on television:

"A great man has died today. The world will miss Joe Coyote. Goodbye, Joe," he said this in the voice he used as the African American paramedic.

“Let me rephrase that your honor. Hello, Joe.” Graham smiled over at Joe and began his testimony.

The plan began on Graham’s wedding day. After Joe pleaded with him to cancel the plastic surgery and back out of the role as his public double, he offered him twice the amount they’d agreed upon, but Graham couldn’t risk either of their lives. Instead of spending his wedding day with Olga having lots of sex, he was scheming with his new wife and devised an ironclad plan to outsmart Sturgis Regan and give them both back their lives.

“Actually, it wasn’t the whole day. We still had a lot of sex,” Graham informed the courtroom. His sense of humor was a welcomed relief and he always knew how to play to a crowd.

“Everything I’m about to tell you has been documented and can be substantiated by the participants as testimony in court in exchange of course for their immunity,” Graham said. The prosecution and the judge gave their tacit approval with a slight nod.

“Sturgis Regan approached me in the spring of 2014 to become the public double for Joe Coyote and participate in his plan to take control of Joe’s billion dollar business. I’m not sure how far back this set up goes, if I was earmarked for the job before I had been in jail for a drug deal that I was involved in during my tenure as an undercover police officer or if I was the perfect candidate because I had nothing to lose but time,” Graham said.

He described the ways in which he had been groomed to transfer control from Joe to Sturgis, the various documents he had signed on Joe’s behalf, meetings he attended with the Board of Directors posing as Joe, and times he met with bankers and investors to siphon money from Joe’s account into Sturgis’s private account. Sturgis’s greed was insatiable. He wanted

complete control over the company, something Graham knew from the beginning. With him in place as the 'Joe puppet,' he'd be able to get his wish and then dispose of the two Joe Coyotes.

“What he didn't realize was that the same people who hooked him up with me, the guys I met in jail or who knew me from my days on the street, were also my friends. You can't buy friends, You can just reward them. They tipped me off that a contract was out on both of us. There we just a few legal and logistical things I had to do to make the transfer of power to Sturgis complete. Joe didn't know any of this and he wouldn't have been able to stop it if he did. Joe, I wasn't ripping you off. I was buying time to keep us both alive. The more I stalled, the closer I was to getting us our freedom.

The plan they devised on his wedding day took two years and several months to put all the pieces in place. It all hinged on Graham being in a public place and convincing the world that Joe Coyote was murdered. Graham had made monetary arrangements for Joe without him knowing it, the house, the bank accounts in another name, the women's clothes, and the high-tech toys in the house, all were Graham's doing.

“The women's clothes were meant as kind of a joke. He's not a cross-dresser by nature. At least I don't think he is. I wanted him to be really careful when he went out of the house. I bet you looked good as a babe,” Graham said.

“I was ugly as hell!” Joe said. The judge banged his gavel and the banter stopped.

Graham explained that he had to work quickly because he got word that Sturgis was eager to get the hits over with so he could move onto the next phase of singularly ruling the Electric Laughter empire. Graham had posed as Joe and signed all the necessary documents,

which meant that in the case of death, Sturgis would be the sole owner in charge of the ever-growing Electric Laughter empire.

“Things were changing at the company, new experiments were being conducted and Sturgis wanted complete control. Joe opened up the door for emotional DNA mapping as it related to the brain. The possibilities were endless. In addition to laughter, what else could be programmed and zapped in the brain? Love? Desire? Hate? Rage? Joe would never have approved of any of it. Sturgis knew that and wanted to take control.”

Pat looked at Joe. He gave her a look and shook his head ‘no’ while twirling his index finger near his ear in the universal ‘crazy’ symbol. He wasn’t crazy. The General had programmed his watch with murderous rage.

“Sturgis assured me that we’d rule the empire together, as soon as Joe was the only Joe Coyote. I knew he had a hit out on both of us,” Graham stated and looked right at Sturgis. Everyone looked at Sturgis.

“Your honor, this is ridiculous. The man faked his own death in order to quit his job after a fight with his employer. You can’t expect me to sit here and listen to these lies and blasphemy,” Sturgis stood up to leave. The guards moved closed to him.

“Sit down, Mr. Regan or I’ll hold you in contempt.”

Sturgis sat down, fuming and flustered. Joe saw his hands shake. Angelica looked at Joe. She was right. His voice had not one drop of trustworthy colors.

Graham continued describing the plan. He assembled his team. The two bodyguards in the car with him were old, trusted friends. They were only in charge of the first lap, covering him

and getting him into the ambulance. He knew he could count on them to get him into the ambulance, not accompany him, and not ask too many questions.

“I loved these guys and didn’t tell them anything about the plan because I wanted to protect them,” Graham said from the witness stand. “I told them that if something happened to me that day to cover my face and to put me in the ambulance as quickly as possible and not to accompany me to the hospital, no matter what.”

“Oh, this is absurd. Enough with the theatrics!” Sturgis squirmed in his seat.

“They were great. They covered my face with their jackets and got me into the ambulance in less than a minute. They didn’t ask any questions when they saw what was in the back of the ambulance.”

Graham showed footage of the bodyguards whisking him into the back of the ambulance. The doors opened and the dark-skinned paramedic was waiting for him in the back of the ambulance. The crowd in the courtroom was mesmerized.

“We should have gotten a gold medal for teamwork, if only faking your own murder on television were an Olympic event,” Graham said with enough levity and humor to lighten the audience.

Graham described the rig on his face. Since they hatched the plan before his plastic surgery, Olga would have access to his cartilage and skin samples from inside his face. He used these facial parts and some of Joe’s actual blood that exploded out from under his hat. It was Graham’s idea to have a private ambulance and to keep it stocked with their own blood.

Graham revealed how Olga brought the facial parts to this country that she saved from his surgery. She had a medical transport license because of her work and had the parts in a super-

coolant device for the transatlantic journey. She was the only other person who knew the whole plan and who participated in every step of it.

She drove the ambulance disguised as a man. He tripled Sturgis's offer and paid the hit man three million dollars not to kill him or Joe and to go along with the fake the assassination. Not bad for an afternoon's work and a lifetime of silence, until now, Graham pointed out.

When asked about the hit man and how he got to him, Graham said he didn't know any more about him, but Sturgis might. "Or, you can follow the money, but I doubt you'll find anything. This guy is a professional, *a very rich professional.*"

He showed another vantage point from someone's cell phone that had circulated at the time of the assassination. He explained that he set off the mini-explosive device with a remote control that he slipped inside the sleeve of his trench coat.

Graham was so well trained in the art of prosthetics and disguises that he could make his face look like it had exploded when really, it was an elaborate rig with the baseball hat and the facial prosthetics. He had watched enough Martin Scorsese movies, so he knew it could be done.

His fake raw face was only exposed for several seconds before the bodyguards wrapped a coat over his head and whisked him into the ambulance.

"It took me over a year to perfect this technique. More than once, I had to tell Joe that I got a chemical peel because my face got a little raw from the experiments. That was before I got it down," Graham said.

Graham turned his attention back to the footage as the bodyguards loaded him into the ambulance. The African American paramedic sat on the side and leaned forward to help them.

"Hurry up! It's okay," the paramedic said.

The bodyguards looked totally freaked out when they saw the paramedic.

“They looked like they had seen a ghost,” Graham said. “Because they had.” He pointed to a streak of white light that emitted from the knee of the paramedic.

“Notice this streak of light. I’ll explain what that is later,” Graham said.

Joe knew exactly what that white streak was and mouthed the words, *Genius*.

Once in the ambulance, Graham had about four minutes to peel off the outer layer of his “blown away” face mask, then rip off the outer layer of his Joe Coyote clothes. Underneath, he was wearing the same clothes as the “ghost like” paramedic. His face under the peeled away mask was the same black color as the paramedic’s face. He quickly reconfigured his nose to look just like the hologram of the African American paramedic that appeared in the back of the ambulance.

By the time they arrived at the hospital, Graham had transformed his own face into one that looked just like the black paramedic’s face. He took on his persona and accent, then gave the performance of his lifetime. Then he showed the clip of his farewell speech.

“A great man has died today. The world will miss Joe Coyote. Goodbye, Joe,” Graham said as the black paramedic.

Meanwhile, Olga jumped out of the driver’s side and left the ambulance running. She arrived next to Graham disguised as another paramedic just as he was finishing his farewell. It was all very well choreographed.

They slid safely into the hospital through a back door. It was a Saturday and the construction workers were off for the weekend. Graham left all his props and any evidence in the ambulance. When they were safely inside the back entrance of the hospital, he pressed the

remote control and blew up the ambulance, kissed his wife, then they each went their separate ways.

Graham and Olga had planted new clothes and disguises in the ceiling tiles of different handicapped bathrooms in the section of the hospital that was being renovated. Olga exited the hospital as a blonde woman dressed in hospital scrubs and Graham left as a caucasian construction worker. They burned their interim disguises and clothes in the hospital incinerator.

The bodyguards answered questions for the media and then disappeared from public view. They knew nothing, so they weren't lying because they actually had very little real information. The only part that got a little tricky was the hologram in the back of the van. It was such a traumatic event that they couldn't be sure who that guy was in the backseat. It wasn't a guy at all, but an illusion.

Graham pointed out the white streak again, which was a break in the hologram, he explained.

“There was no one in the back seat. It was all just smoke and mirrors, definitely a lot of smoke.”

Olga left that night for Switzerland where they'd stashed plenty of money for their new life together. Graham joined her a couple of weeks later after he knew for certain that Joe had found the house and was safe. He left him with a new identity, Frank Uzell and plenty of money.

Olga performed the next plastic surgery operation by herself at the clinic where she worked. The old doctor had recently died and his replacement had not yet been found. She had enough experience to perform this on her own. It was risky, but it was the only way.

Olga left her position shortly after that, citing her devotion to the doctor. She didn't leave a forwarding address.

They moved to Vienna where Graham worked in a bakery and Olga stayed home with their children. They lived a modest lifestyle and were very happy together. He felt safe hiding in broad daylight in a big city where he pretended to be Italian. It was a safer bet than revealing that he was really an American.

Graham's testimony continued on for hours. Finally, the judge called a recess and they took Sturgis into custody. Joe was released and all charges were dropped.

"I guess you worked your way up from the ant farm idea," Joe said as the two men shared a moment alone together before they had to face the media.

Graham took out the photos of his children. "That one's Sophie, she's just like her mom, strong-willed and clever and she's got me wrapped around her little finger."

Joe studied the photo all choked up.

"This is my son. His name is Joseph." Graham was too choked up to say anymore.

"God I missed you," Joe said.

CHAPTER 20

It took hours for Joe to reclaim his life. First he had to be officially released from prison. The judge wanted him to have police protection and it was going to be tricky escaping the onslaught of reporters who wanted interviews. He and Graham agreed to hold an impromptu press conference, which seemed to go on indefinitely. All the while he looked around for Angelica but couldn't find her anywhere in the crowd.

Joe arranged to send Graham home on a private jet. Graham asked him to come with him, but Joe declined.

"Someday, I promise. Not today," he said.

Pat had a few moments alone to thank Graham and to tell him she was a little worried about him.

"Let me explain something to you that they might have forgotten to teach you in crime school or law school or any of your other fancy school and degrees that you have. If they wanted me dead, I would be dead. It's a simple equation. I can still offer them more money than Sturgis can, so I'll be just fine. And don't worry, I'm not going to call a hit on Sturgis. Why would I? I'd miss all the fun of knowing that he's going to jail," Graham said.

"What's next for you Joe Coyote?" One of the reporters shouted out as the press conference was winding down.

"I'm going home," he said. "Then, who knows!"

"Where's home?" One of them asked jokingly.

Joe waved them off, hugged Graham, and was escorted back inside the police station where Dr. First and Gloria waited for him. He hugged them and looked around for Angelica.

“It’s over. Go home, Joe,” Dr. First whispered in his ear.

Gloria hugged him and put her red scarf around his neck. “Welcome back.” He hugged her again. He was so choked up that he couldn’t speak. *Where was Angelica?*

“Since I already know where you live, would you like a ride home?” Pat asked.

“Only if you promise not to tell anyone,” Joe hugged Pat.

“Thank you for everything.”

“Come on,” Pat said as he followed her out a back way and into the alley where her car was parked. They climbed in and drove away.

A few blocks from his house, he asked Pat to let him out so he could walk the rest of the way.

“You sure?” she asked. Something sounded unusual or concerning in her tone, but he didn’t know what it was exactly.

“I’ll be fine.”

Joe walked home as the late autumn sky sank into dusk, streaks of crimson sunlight dusted the tops of the dark blue clouds that streaked across the sky. If these colors were sounds, what would they be, Joe wondered. Maybe an oboe with a hint of flute, he mused. *Definitely a cello.*

He crossed the street to the park and saw Red practicing with the soccer ball, dribbling, then kicking it into the makeshift goal with all his might. Joe watched him with tears in his eyes.

“Hi!” Joe said to him, suddenly shy. Red sized him up and down.

“Who are you?” he asked, suspicious of strangers.

“I live in that house over there,” Joe replied.

“That weird looking lady move out?” he asked.

“She’s gone for good.”

Red looked him over for a moment, soccer ball nestled in the crook of his arm, resting on his hip. How could Joe ever thank this kid for showing up and being a kid and giving him the gift of innocence and time passing and life happening out in the world?

“You play soccer?” Red asked him

“I do now. My name’s Joe,” Joe said.

“My real name is Edwin, but everyone calls me Red,” Red said.

“Red it is!”

Red dribbled the ball to Joe who dribbled it back. Joe surprised himself with fancy foot moves that he learned from watching Red all these years. Red was impressed, which made Joe happier than he had been in years.

Joe let him score off of him several times, which made Red happier than he had been in days.

“Are you letting me win?” Red quizzed him.

“No way! You’re just good, or I’m old and slow,” Joe said.

Red’s mother called him from down the street. He snatched up the ball and waved to Joe as he walked toward his home.

“Hey Joe, Cubs or Sox?” Red asked.

“Are you kidding me? CUBS!” Joe answered emphatically.

“Welcome to the neighborhood, Joe,” Red said.

“Thanks. See you around.”

Joe watched him scurry home. His gait was part jogging, part skipping.

Joe looked up at the sky and soaked in the feeling of being alive and free. He saw a light on in his house just up the street. He walked quickly toward it.

He opened the door and heard cello music. At first, he thought maybe Pat had left on the hologram when she was last at his home. *Then he knew.*

The music stopped. Joe walked up to the second floor to his living room, his heart beating like the sound of a giant bird in his chest. There was Angelica, sitting in the same chair where her hologram used to be, but this was the real life version of her.

She looked up and smiled. The moment wrapped around him like the music that still hung in the air.

“Welcome home, Joe,” Angelica said as she stood up, leaned her cello against the chair, and walked over to him with open arms.

He took her in his arms, kissed her gently, then kissed her passionately, and then cried from the joy and the overwhelming gratitude of finally coming home.