

c h a p t e r
T W O

TONY AND PAULA EDGED their way into the kiosk. The space was cramped and even a few other people in the interior meant sliding past or around other bodies to view the paintings. Whenever one or two exited the kiosk it allowed more freedom of movement and a wider perspective on the grid of artwork. Tony and Paula moved slowly, heads and eyes scanning side to side, or up and down, stopping occasionally to focus on a specific piece. They were struck, as were most, by the suggestive eyes and expressions. The urge to join in coauthoring a painting's narrative was almost involuntary.

As she moved along one panel, Paula's eye was drawn downward. She stooped to bring her line of sight closer to a painting hung at thigh height. She stared for a few moments as she cocked her head, confused at first and then stunned by a jolt of disbelief. She straightened suddenly and drew back, inadvertently backing into another occupant of the kiosk. She pulled the fingertips of both hands to her mouth and gave forth with an audible gasp, as much a sob as a cry of anguish.

"Oh my God, Tony!" she called out. Tears welled up in her eyes and spilled down her cheeks as she pointed. "Oh my God! Oh my God, Tony, it's Amanda! Look! It's her! Oh my God." She began to sag as she gulped in deep, desperate breaths of air, holding the back of her clenched fist to her mouth.

He rushed to her side and supported her, keeping her knees from buckling. Two other bystanders in the kiosk backed away, sidling toward an exit, unable to grasp what might have caused this outburst.

Tony and Paula sank down together, bringing their faces level with the painting. He craned forward, eyes widening as he absorbed the

same reality. The young woman in the painting was almost a mirror image—in so many small subtleties and features—to their daughter Amanda, who had disappeared without a trace eight months ago.

Paula wiped away tears, then reached out slowly to touch the face in the painting. Tony gently pulled her hand away as they gradually raised up, eyes fixed on the face. They turned toward Colleen, who by now had eased off her stool and drifted in their direction, confused by an unexplained outpouring of anguish on an otherwise festive, sun drenched morning in early May.

Paula pointed down at the painting as Colleen drew near. “That’s our daughter, Amanda. It’s a wonderful likeness. You’re so talented. When did you paint it? How well do you know her?” There was a desperate quality to the last two questions. Her eyes brimming over, Paula looked beseechingly at Colleen.

Colleen let her gaze drift back and forth across their faces. “I’m sorry, I’ve never seen or known anyone named Amanda. I don’t do portraits from any reference. I paint from something in here,” she said, placing her palm on her chest. “Somewhere inside. I don’t know where it comes from.”

Tony edged forward insistently, closing the space between them. “That’s impossible. That painting could not be a closer likeness of our daughter. It’s her. Exactly. There’s no mistaking.”

His eyes widened as his voice tightened. “Please, we have to know how you know Amanda. How you came to paint that portrait.”

Colleen backed away and swept her arm around the kiosk. “Every painting you see here, every painting I do comes from an unknown place in my imagination. I don’t know any of the people in any of the paintings. I’ve never seen any of them. I never know what a subject will look like until I start to paint. And it just keeps evolving as I paint. When it’s finished there’s a person there. But I don’t know who it is. It’s no one. It’s just someone in a painting.”

Colleen had tried to explain the process so often that eventually

she had been able to condense it into a reasonably coherent thumb-nail summary.

But the Lambrights were not at all tuned in to abstract notions of spontaneous creativity. They were in the grip of a nightmare that stalked them through sleepless nights. Their daylight hours were saturated by agonizing photographic reminders of how Amanda had been woven through the texture of their lives. And now they saw what they believed beyond any doubt to be an amazingly precise visual embrace of their daughter's likeness. Now they would cling to it as a miraculous connection from out of nowhere, a link that opened a door and let light in. And they pressed forward toward that light with the desperation of parents driven to follow every possible thread to find a missing child.

Paula's eyes refilled with tears as she looked at Colleen. She tilted her head and placed her hand on Colleen's forearm in a gesture of supplication. "Our daughter disappeared eight months ago. We have no idea where or how. The police have exhausted every possibility." She choked. "We're at our wit's end. Can you understand?"

She groped for her wallet and opened it to a photo of Amanda. "See? Can you see why that has to be her?"

Tony did likewise with his smartphone, swiping over photos till he came to one of Amanda. "I'm sorry, what's your name?"

"Colleen. Colleen Grey."

"Colleen, Hi. I'm Tony. Please come look." He showed the smart phone image to Colleen and then motioned her toward the painting as he knelt and held the photo next to it. "Tell me you don't know that's Amanda. It has to be her. It is her." His next exclamation was half shout, half plea: "My God!"

The emotional tumult inside the kiosk was a disturbing anomaly, a deterrent to passersby, causing them to steer around it—a man on his knees, shouting; a woman standing beside him, sobbing. The scene was jarringly discordant with the be-happy, go-with-the-flow

buzz of the Shrimp Festival.

Colleen felt she had to gain control, somehow, over a cascading emotional spectacle that had arisen from nowhere. "Please, you're upsetting everyone for no reason. I've told you these paintings are just expressions, images that come to me spontaneously as I paint. I'm sorry. I don't know your daughter. I've never known anyone named Amanda. Okay? Please, I don't know what else to say."

Tony stood slowly and pulled Paula to him. Their faces were vacant, drawn, beaten. They had been down so many paths leading nowhere. And then today, there she was. And then, she wasn't. Or so the artist said. They stooped once more, lingering in front of the shrine of the Missing Daughter. After a time they straightened. Tony guided Paula out of the kiosk as she looked back over her shoulder.

"That's our daughter," Paula said as she looked back at Colleen. "I know that's her."

Colleen felt a chill creep up the back of her neck and spread across her shoulders. She turned to look back at the painting and allowed her eyes to lock with those of the young woman in the painting that had so transfixed the Lambrights. And for a very brief moment she imagined she might have been spooked, drawn in through the eyes, the facial expression, into some kind of unwelcome wavelength. She pushed back against it. There's a wavelength for all of them, she thought. They all look like somebody, I just don't know who. Any one of them looks like whatever each painting turns out to be, that's all. She took deep breaths and went back to sit down on her stool.

Eventually the tidal ebb and flow of the crowd was such that it washed over any remnants of the recent drama. People began to drift back into her kiosk. She watched their faces as they scanned the rows of paintings. To her relief the expressions and reactions were much the same as always: engrossed, contemplative, admiring, but not to the point of reaching for a checkbook or credit card.

The Lambrights, meanwhile, were swept back into the current of

the packed throng on Centre Street. But now the sensation of being carried along was no longer a means of escape, losing themselves in the festive swarm of people. They turned off on a side street and walked till they found a place to sit down. She stared off into the distance. He sat with his elbows on his knees, hands clasped and head bowed, looking at the ground.

“I know it was her,” Paula said, her eyes still somewhere far off. “It had to be. I could see it in her eyes, her expression. It was like she was looking back at me. And . . . oh God, Tony, she was sad. Or lost, reaching out to find us.” She put her hands to her mouth and began to cry once again.

Tony put his hand on her knee and squeezed softly. Over the last several months they had endured so much pain and shared grief it was hard to extend any comfort that hadn’t worn out its meaning a long time ago. “It could have been a coincidence,” he sighed. “Who knows?” He slumped, the fatigued posture of someone on the edge of losing hope.

“You don’t believe that. I know you don’t. I saw how you reacted.” She turned to face him and squeezed his hands with all her might, so hard that Tony winced just a little.

“I want to buy that painting. And I want to take it to Detective Hodges. Show it to him.”

“What will that do? What’s he supposed to do with it? He’s seen dozens of photographs of Amanda.”

She squeezed his hands again, her eyes glistening with tears. “It’s not a photograph. It’s a painting! Of someone who looks exactly like Amanda! That woman painted it. He could go talk to her. Who knows? It’s a chance, Tony! It’s something! We have to try.”

He turned to look at her eyes, red-rimmed and glazed with sorrow. “Okay.” His shoulders sagged. “I guess. But, God, please, don’t get your hopes up. It could be nothing. It probably is nothing.”

She nodded through her tears. “I know. All I can think of is the

look on her face in that painting. She seemed to be trying to touch us from somewhere, Tony. How did that woman capture that?”

He looked up at her as his eyes misted over. “I don’t know. I’m so tired of reaching and coming up with nothing. Let’s go get the painting and get out of here. We’ll bring Amanda, or whoever she is, home with us, okay?”

They made their way back up through the anatomy of the crowd: stopping, starting, dodging and weaving—cutting through it instead of being pulled along with it like cattle. Though the likelihood of the painting having sold in the last 45 minutes was small, there was urgency now in their purpose. As they ran into logjams of people, the prospect of someone else buying the painting of their missing daughter sparked a borderline panic.

Finally Colleen’s kiosk was off to their left. They angled toward it, violating some of the unspoken rules of crowd etiquette as they sliced abruptly in front of waves of people strolling casually in the opposite direction. Once inside the kiosk they darted anxiously toward the painting, relieved that it was still there. The sticker on the frame indicated a price of \$390, an inconsequential sum given their state of mind.

Paula turned to the back of the kiosk, looking for Colleen, who was nowhere to be seen. She was absent for a reason. Shrimp Festival organizers had enlisted a cadre of volunteers who could relieve the exhibitors from the tedium of manning a kiosk over several hours. Seated on the stool previously occupied by Colleen was a disinterested young woman with no knowledge whatsoever of what had transpired in the kiosk just a short while ago.

For Tony and Paula the connection with Colleen seemed crucial. And now she was gone. Where? Paula stood guard over the painting, assuming the posture of a hyper-vigilant sentry. Tony approached the young tattooed waif who represented a tenuous link with Colleen and now an even more vaporous link with their missing daughter.

They grew slightly frantic in their urge to reconnect with Colleen. With no preliminaries and in an insistent tone meant to convey urgency, Tony asked, “Where’s Colleen, the artist?”

The young woman removed ear buds leading from the ubiquitous smart phone. She shrugged. “Um, I don’t know. She’s on a break. I think she went to get some food, not sure.”

“We want to buy one of her paintings,” Tony said, turning toward Paula who by now had removed the painting from its place in the display and was clutching it in her arms. “That one.”

“I’m only here watching the booth for her. I can’t help you with that. Sorry. You have to wait for Colleen.” She shrugged again.

Tony looked at his watch. “Any idea how long she’ll be gone?”

“Not really. If you want I can set that painting aside and you can come back.”

“No!” Paula said sharply. And then, quietly, “We’ll wait. We’ll wait right here.”

“Whatever. Okay.”

Tony pointed at the young woman’s smart phone. “Can you text her? Let her know we’re here and want to buy the painting? This is very important.”

Though the young woman had adopted the casual, disconnected mien of many her age, her face now reflected just the slightest tinge of passive aggressive annoyance. “Sure. Yeah. I guess.”

Tony’s brusque assertiveness was at odds with the don’t-worry-be-happy ambiance of the Shrimp Festival as well as the prevailing laid-back vibe of Fernandina Beach.

The indifferent stand-in expertly thumbed a text message on her smart phone, hit send and then looked up at Tony, and shrugged yet again.

Tony and Paula, the painting firmly in their grasp, moved to a back corner of the kiosk, out of the way of people drifting through. A few minutes later the young placeholder looked at her phone. “She

said she'll be back as soon as she can."

Annoyed by the imprecision of the return message, Tony nodded and smiled weakly, "Thanks. We'll just wait."

The young woman with the tattoos and nose rings withdrew into the ennui of whatever absorbed her focus through the wires of the ear buds. Paula stood calmly, arms encircling the treasured painting. Checking his watch at frequent intervals, Tony rocked back and forth from heel to toe, arms folded. His mannerisms and body language were imaginary engines that might somehow accelerate the arrival of Colleen.

Passing time from their vantage at the rearmost corner of the kiosk, they gazed absently at those who browsed and drifted among the paintings. It was as if they half expected another set of eyes to lock onto a painting as theirs had. For now, for the time being, it was not to be. The stream of meanderers and strollers, as always, paused and contemplated individual paintings before moving on.

At length, Colleen returned through a back entrance of the kiosk, squeezing past Paula and Tony as she did so. The brief physical and psychic proximity was uncomfortable. Tony moved to envelop her before Paula grabbed his arm and slid past him to approach Colleen with a smile.

"We want to buy this painting," she said, holding it out at arms length.

Colleen surveyed the expressions on their faces and managed, "That's great. I'm glad you like it. It's, um, 390 dollars." There was a disconnected politesse in her words.

Tony reached for his wallet, fished out a credit card and handed it to her. No bargaining, no hesitation. Colleen, unused to the commerce of actually selling a painting, struggled momentarily with the interface of the credit card reader plugged into her smart phone. The circumstances drained the purchase of any of the pleasantness or glow that would come with acquiring a valued piece of art. It was all

very awkward and brittle, more like buying drugs in a back alley or delivering ransom money to a hostage taker.

When the transaction was complete, Colleen reached behind her to retrieve a large plastic bag, meant to package and protect the painting temporarily.

In protest, Tony thrust his arm in front of Colleen as the words of his objection caught in his throat, a choked back sob: “Please, I don’t want my daughter in a plastic bag.”

Colleen gestured, turned to Paula. “It’s just—“

“I know. It’s okay, Tony. Just to protect it from the crowd till we get to the car? Alright?”

“Yeah, okay. Let’s go.”

They turned to leave the kiosk. Paula looked back at Colleen. “Oh, that’s right. Forgot. Do you have a business card by any chance?”

“Sure.” She took one off a small stack on a table and handed it to Paula, who examined it for a long moment before letting her glance linger on Colleen.

“Thank you.” She and Tony set off through the crush, he running interference, she enfolding the painting in her arms. Colleen watched them go; a strange and disquieting encounter. Still, at the very least a sold painting would help defray the cost of the kiosk.