THE MATCH: Complete Strangers, a Miracle Face Transplant, Two Lives Transformed is the True Story of a Daring Surgery

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Boston, MA (PRWEB) October 8, 2010 -- THE MATCH: Complete Strangers, a Miracle Face Transplant, Two Lives Transformed is the true story of Susan Whitman Helfgot’s dramatic decision and the daring surgery that changed medical history—and lives—forever.

Joseph Helfgot always knew he would be an organ donor. After battling heart disease for more than a decade, he understood the life-and-death stakes of a transplant waiting list. But when he passed away from complications during his own heart surgery, the doctors asked his wife, Susan, to donate something far more personal and controversial: her husband’s face. It remains only the second time this operation has been performed in the United States. THE MATCH: Complete Strangers, a Miracle Face Transplant, Two Lives Transformed (Simon & Schuster; October 12, 2010; $26.00) is the true story of Susan’s dramatic decision and the daring surgery that changed medical history—and lives—forever.

A gripping hospital drama and a compelling personal tale, THE MATCH recounts the extraordinary operation that brought Joseph’s face to James Maki, a Vietnam veteran and former heroin addict. Author Susan Whitman Helfgot shares for the first time the intimate story behind the headline-making news, as well as the remarkable connections between the two men. It took two operating rooms, seventeen hours, and thirty-four doctors, nurses, and technicians to make the transplant a reality. While groundbreaking science and technology paved the way, it’s the courage and compassion of those involved that make THE MATCH a riveting read.

Joseph, a vivacious college professor and Hollywood marketing consultant, grew up in postwar New York City, the son of hardworking grocery store owners who had survived Auschwitz. Smart, passionate, and unique, Joseph charmed everyone he met, whether they were movie executives (he helped make Dances with Wolves a box office smash) or the nurses and doctors who cared for him at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston, Massachusetts. Susan fell hard for him, even after he courted her by sending a piñata filled with fortune cookies that all read “I love you.” True to his nature, Joseph managed to stay upbeat during his twenty year battle with heart disease, but he lost the fight during his long-awaited transplant surgery. After the operation, blood clots traveled to his brain and caused a massive stroke.

While Joseph was taking on Hollywood, James Maki was living in a halfway house outside of Boston. The adopted son of Japanese-American parents who were forced into an internment camp during WWII, Jim was a smart but troubled child. Part Japanese and part Native American, he faced prejudice growing up and couldn’t seem to stay out of fights. Despite being a gifted athlete, he never found direction and became hooked on heroin while serving in Vietnam. Upon his return home, Jim married and had a daughter, but that wasn’t enough to set him straight. Ironically, it was a horrific accident many years later that finally gave him the focus he needed to
change his life. One night while high, he fell onto the subway tracks, landing on the electric third rail. His face was essentially burned off, making it impossible for him to eat or speak normally—or go outside without having people stare or even scream. He dealt with this pain for several years, until one day he got the news that changed his life.

THE MATCH is the emotional tale of how the seemingly disparate lives of Joseph Helfgot and James Maki came to intersect. It puts you in Susan’s place as she grapples with the difficult decision to donate her husband’s face, and how this choice affected all those involved. It takes you into the operating room—along with a film crew for ABC News’ summer documentary series Boston Med—during the emotional moment when Jim’s new face begins to turn from pale to pink, indicating success. And it introduces you to all the people whose lives were changed by this unique event, from the organ bank employee who had to ask an unthinkable question, to the pioneering Dr. Pomahac, who helped get Brigham and Women’s Hospital a Department of Defense grant for future face transplants. Ultimately, this daring surgery did more than heal one man; it turned strangers into a family, now closely bonded with a passionate goal to increase awareness of organ donation.

Susan Whitman Helfgot tells the story as only an insider can, revealing a mosaic of behind-the-scenes moments and interlocking lives. THE MATCH is about an unparalleled medical miracle—and the courage and generosity of the people who made it happen.


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