

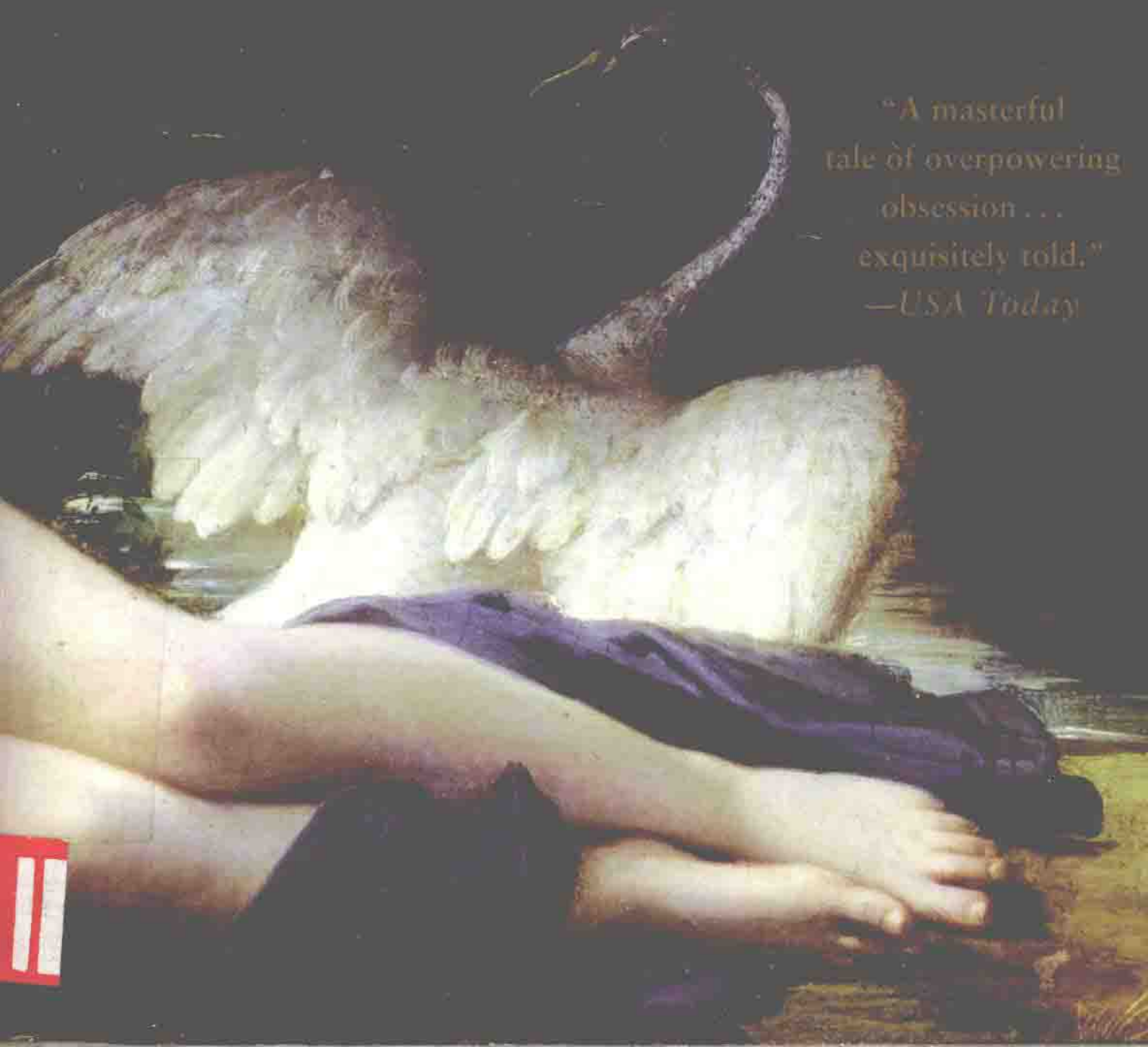
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AUTHOR OF *The* HISTORIAN

ELIZABETH
KOSTOVA

The
SWAN THIEVES

"A masterful
tale of overpowering
obsession . . .
exquisitely told."
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The
Swan Thieves

A Novel

Elizabeth Kostova



Little, Brown and Company
NEW YORK BOSTON LONDON

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237 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10017

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Printed in the United States of America

Originally published in hardcover by Little, Brown and Company

First Back Bay international mass market edition, June 2010

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

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The
Swan Thieves

ALSO BY ELIZABETH KOSTOVA

The Historian

For my mother
la bonne mère

You would hardly believe how difficult it is to place a figure alone on a canvas, and to concentrate all the interest on this single and universal figure and still keep it living and real.

—Édouard Manet, 1880

The
Swan Thieves

Outside the village there is a fire ring, blackening the thawing snow. Next to the fire ring is a basket that has sat there for months and is beginning to weather to the color of ash. There are benches where the old men huddle to warm their hands—too cold even for that now, too close to twilight, too dreary. This is not Paris. The air smells of smoke and night sky; there is a hopeless amber sinking beyond the woods, almost a sunset. The dark is coming down so quickly that someone has already lit a lantern in the window of the house nearest the deserted fire. It is January or February, or perhaps a grim March, 1895—the year will be marked in rough black numbers against the shadows in one corner. The roofs of the village are slate, stained with melting snow, which slides off them in heaps. Some of the lanes are walled, others open to the fields and muddy gardens. The doors to the houses are closed, the scent of cooking rising above the chimneys.

Only one person is astir in all this desolation—a woman in heavy traveling clothes walking down a lane toward the last huddle of dwellings. Someone is lighting a lantern there, too, bending over the flame, a human form but indistinct in the distant window. The woman in the lane carries herself with dignity, and she isn't wearing the shabby apron and wooden sabots of the village. Her cloak and long skirts stand out against the violet snow. Her hood is edged with fur that hides all but the white curve of her cheek. The hem of her dress has a geometric border of pale blue. She is walking away with a bundle in her arms, something wrapped tightly, as if against the cold. The trees hold their branches numbly

toward the sky; they frame the road. Someone has left a red cloth on the bench in front of the house at the end of the lane—a shawl, perhaps, or a small tablecloth, the only spot of bright color. The woman shields her bundle with her arms, with her gloved hands, turning her back on the center of the village as quickly as possible. Her boots click on a patch of ice in the road. Her breath shows pale against the gathering dark. She draws herself together, close, protective, hurrying. Is she leaving the village or hastening toward one of the houses in the last row?

Even the one person watching doesn't know the answer, nor does he care. He has worked most of the afternoon, stroking in the walls of the lanes, positioning the stark trees, measuring the road, waiting for the ten minutes of winter sunset. The woman is an intruder, but he puts her in, too, quickly, noting the details of her clothes, using the failing daylight to brush in the silhouette of her hood, the way she bends forward to stay warm or to hide her bundle. A beautiful surprise, whoever she is. She is the missing note, the movement he needed to fill that central stretch of road with its dirt-pocked snow. He has long since retreated, working now just inside his window—he is old and his limbs ache if he paints out of doors in the cold for more than a quarter of an hour—so he can only imagine her quick breath, her step on the road, the crunch of snow under her sharp boot heel. He is aging, ill, but for a moment he wishes she would turn and look straight at him. He pictures her hair as dark and soft, her lips vermilion, her eyes large and wary.

But she does not turn, and he finds he is glad. He needs her as she is, needs her moving away from him into the snowy tunnel of his canvas, needs the straight form of her back and heavy skirts with their elegant border, her arm cradling the wrapped object. She is a real woman and she is in a hurry, but now she is also fixed forever. Now she is frozen in her haste. She is a real woman and now she is a painting.

CHAPTER I

Marlow

I got the call about Robert Oliver in April 1999, less than a week after he'd pulled a knife in the nineteenth-century collection at the National Gallery. It was a Tuesday, one of those terrible mornings that sometimes come to the Washington area when spring has already been flowery and even hot—ruinous hail and heavy skies, with rumbles of thunder in the suddenly cold air. It was also, by coincidence, exactly a week after the massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado; I was still thinking obsessively about that event, as I imagined every psychiatrist in the country must have been. My office seemed full of those young people with their sawed-off shotguns, their demonic resentment. How had we failed them and—even more—their innocent victims? The violent weather and the country's gloom seemed to me fused that morning.

When my phone rang, the voice on the other end was that of a friend and colleague, Dr. John Garcia. John is a fine man—and a fine psychiatrist—with whom I went to school long ago and who takes me out for lunch now and then at the restaurant of his choice, seldom allowing me to pay. He does emergency intake and inpatient care in one of Washington's biggest hospitals and, like me, also sees private patients.

John was telling me now that he wanted to transfer a patient to me, to put him in my care, and I could hear the eagerness in his voice. "This guy could be a difficult case. I don't know what you'll make of him, but I'd prefer for him to be under your care

at Goldengrove. Apparently he's an artist, a successful one—he got himself arrested last week, then brought to us. He doesn't talk much and doesn't like us much, here. His name is Robert Oliver."

"I've heard of him, but I don't really know his work," I admitted. "Landscapes and portraits—I think he was on the cover of *ARTnews* a couple of years ago. What did he do to get arrested?" I turned to the window and stood, watching hail fall like expensive white gravel over the walled back lawn and a battered magnolia. The grass was already very green, and for a second there was watery sunlight over everything, then a fresh burst of hail.

"He tried to attack a painting in the National Gallery. With a knife."

"A painting? Not a person?"

"Well, apparently there was no one else in the room at that moment, but a guard came in and saw him lunging for a painting."

"Did he put up a fight?" I watched hail sowing itself in the bright grass.

"Yes. He eventually dropped the knife on the floor, but then he grabbed the guard and shook him up pretty badly. He's a big man. Then he stopped and let himself just be led away, for some reason. The museum is trying to decide whether or not to press assault charges. I think they're going to drop, but he took a big risk."

I studied the backyard again. "National Gallery paintings are federal property, right?"

"Right."

"What kind of knife was it?"

"Just a pocketknife. Nothing dramatic, but he could have done a lot of damage. He was very excited, thought he was on a heroic mission, and then broke down at the station, said he hadn't slept in days, even cried a little. They brought him over to the psych ER, and I admitted him." I could hear John waiting for my answer.

"How old is this guy?"

"He's young—well, forty-three, but that sounds young to me

these days, you know?" I knew, and laughed. Turning fifty just two years before had shocked us both, and we'd covered it by celebrating with several friends who were in the same situation.

"He had a couple of other things on him, too—a sketchbook and a packet of old letters. He won't let anyone else touch them."

"So what do you want me to do for him?" I found myself leaning against the desk to rest; I'd come to the end of a long morning, and I was hungry.

"Just take him," John said.

But the habits of caution run deep in our profession. "Why? Are you trying to give me additional headaches?"

"Oh, come on." I could hear John smiling. "I've never known you to turn a patient away, Dr. Dedication, and this one should be worth your while."

"Because I'm a painter?"

He hesitated only a beat. "Frankly, yes. I don't pretend to understand artists, but I think you'll get this guy. I told you he doesn't talk much, and when I say he doesn't talk much, I mean I've gotten maybe three sentences out of him. I think he's switching into depression, in spite of the meds we started him on. He also shows anger and has periods of agitation. I'm worried about him."

I considered the tree, the emerald lawn, the scattered melting hailstones, again the tree. It stood a little to the left of center, in the window, and the darkness of the day had given its mauve and white buds a brightness they didn't have when the sun shone. "What do you have him on?"

John ran through the list: a mood stabilizer, an antianxiety drug, and an antidepressant, all at good doses. I picked up a pen and pad from my desk.

"Diagnosis?"

John told me, and I wasn't surprised. "Fortunately for us, he signed a release of information in the ER while he was still talking. We've also just gotten copies of records from a psychiatrist in

North Carolina he saw about two years ago. Apparently the last time he saw anybody.”

“Does he have significant anxiety?”

“Well, he won’t talk about it, but I think he shows it. And this isn’t his first round of meds, according to the file. In fact, he arrived here with some Klonopin in a two-year-old bottle in his jacket. It probably wasn’t doing him much good without a mood stabilizer on board. We finally got hold of the wife in North Carolina—ex-wife, actually—and she told us some more about his past treatments.”

“Suicidal?”

“Possibly. It’s hard to do a proper assessment, since he won’t talk. He hasn’t attempted anything here. He’s more like enraged. It’s like keeping a bear in a cage—a silent bear. But with this kind of presentation, I don’t want to just release him. He’s got to stay somewhere for a while, have someone figure out what’s really going on, and his meds will need fine-tuning. He did sign in voluntarily, and I bet he’ll go pretty willingly at this point. He doesn’t like it here.”

“So you think I can get him to talk?” It was our old joke, and John rose obligingly to it.

“Marlow, you could get a stone to talk.”

“Thanks for the compliment. And thanks especially for messing up my lunch break. Does he have insurance?”

“Some. The social worker is on that.”

“All right—have him brought out to Goldengrove. Tomorrow at two, with the files. I’ll check him in.”

We hung up, and I stood there wondering if I could squeeze in five minutes of sketching while I ate, which I like to do when my schedule is heavy; I still had a one thirty, a two o’clock, a three o’clock, a four o’clock, and then a meeting at five o’clock. And tomorrow I would put in a ten-hour day at Goldengrove, the private residential center where I’d worked for the previous twelve years. Now I needed my soup, my salad, and the pencil under my fingers for a few minutes.

The Swan Thieves

I thought, too, of something I had forgotten about for a long time, although I used to remember it often. When I was twenty-one, freshly graduated from Columbia (which had filled me with history and English as well as science) and headed already for medical school at the University of Virginia, my parents volunteered enough money to help me go with my roommate to Italy and Greece for a month. It was my first time out of the United States. I was electrified by paintings in Italian churches and monasteries, by the architecture of Florence and Siena. On the Greek island of Páros, which produces the most perfect, translucent marble in the world, I found myself alone in a local archaeological museum.

This museum had only one statue of value, which stood in a room by itself. Herself: she was a Nike, about five feet tall, in battered pieces, with no head or arms, and with scars on her back where she'd once sprouted wings, red stains on the marble from her long entombment in the island earth. You could still see her masterful carving, the draperies like an eddy of water over her body. They had reattached one of her little feet. I was alone in the room, sketching her, when the guard came in for a moment to shout, "Close soon!" After he left, I packed up my drawing kit, and then—without any thought of the consequences—I approached the Nike one last time and bent to kiss her foot. The guard was on me in a second, roaring, actually collaring me. I've never been thrown out of a bar, but that day I was thrown out of a one-guard museum.

I picked up the phone and called John back, caught him still in his office.

"What was the painting?"

"What?"

"The painting that your patient—Mr. Oliver—attacked."

John laughed. "You know, I wouldn't have thought of asking that, but it was included in the police report. It's called *Leda*. A Greek myth, I guess. At least that's what comes to mind. The report said it was a painting of a naked woman."

“One of Zeus’s conquests,” I said. “He came to her in the form of a swan. Who painted it?”

“Oh, come on—you’re making this feel like Art History 125. Which I almost failed, by the way. I don’t know who painted it and I doubt the arresting officer did either.”

“All right. Get back to work. Have a good day, John,” I said, trying to uncrick my neck and hold the receiver at the same time.

“And you, my friend.”