
Opening Extract from...

The Swan Thieves

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A novel

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sphere

Chapter 1

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.

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."