

Guillaume Musso

AFTERWARDS...

a novel



Prologue

*Nantucket Island
Massachusetts
Fall 1972*

The lake lay at the eastern end of the island beyond reedy marshlands. A fine, clear day.

For the past few days it had been cold. Now the weather was balmy again, and the fiery colors of Indian summer played on the lake's surface.

"Hey! Come look!" called the little girl.

The boy approached the shore and looked to see what his friend was pointing at. A large bird swam among the water plants, its jet-black bill and elongated neck all grace and majesty.

A swan.

When it was only a few feet from the two children, the bird dipped its beak AND neck in the water. Then it raised its head with a long, soft musical cry quite unlike the babbling sound of the yellow-billed species more commonly found in public parks.

"I'm going to pet him!"

She walked to the very edge of the lake and stretched out her hand. Alarmed, the huge bird abruptly raised its wings in alarm. It startled her, and she lost her footing. As the swan took off from the lake in a flurry of powerful wing-beats, the little girl toppled into the water.

The cold immediately cut off her breath, as if a vice were tightening around her chest. She was a good swimmer for her age: at the seashore. Swimming the breaststroke, she often managed to paddle several hundred yards. But the lake water was ice-cold and the shoreline steep. She thrashed about furiously, then panicked as she realized that she would be unable to climb the bank. Her universe seemed an infinity of water, and she felt tiny, overwhelmed.

The boy did not hesitate. Kicking off his shoes, he dived fully clothed into the lake.

“Grab on to me. Don’t be scared.”

With the girl clinging to him, he struggled back to shore. With his last strength, he hoisted her upward, and she managed to reach a hold and haul herself up the bank.

Just as he attempted to climb the bank in his turn, he felt himself weaken, as though two strong arms were pulling him with inexorable force to the lake bottom. He choked, his heartbeat accelerated, and a terrible pressure gripped his brain.

He struggled until he felt the water rush into his lungs. Then, defeated, he lost his grip and sank. His eardrums boomed and everything turned black. Sightless, disoriented, immersed in freezing darkness, he had only one coherent thought: I am about to die.

Nothing remained but this glacial, terrifying blackness.

Blackness.

Blackness.

Then suddenly...

A light.