

Swan Diaries by Axel Forrester

Chapter 1: Anna

Trient, Switzerland

June 1944

I stood still before the open barn door, listening. My daughter said she'd heard noises coming from there. The gun was in my hand. *Stay calm*, I told myself. *Take the safety off. Be ready.* It was early morning. The forest was shrouded in mist, my breath, small puffs of fear. There was the gentle thud of a pine cone, falling from a nearby tree. In the distance, the rapid-fire tapping of a woodpecker, echoing through the woods like the sound of machine gun fire that sometimes drifted over the mountain. Then I heard it. A moan. It was coming from inside. I stepped through the doorway, clutching the pistol in my right hand. The barn was empty of sheep this time of year, the flock in high pastures. Their smell lingered—grassy, pungent, tangled with the scent of hay. Moving into the shadows, I raised the luger as my eyes adjusted to the dim light.

'I have a gun!' I yelled, holding my husband's revolver. I'd been practicing.

'Don't shoot! S'il vous plait!' A man's voice. He coughed. My head turned toward the sound as my eyes strained to see, my ears to hear.

My foot touched something on the ground and I jumped back.

'Come out where I can see you!' I shouted in English.

Then my eyes adjusted and I saw him, laying before me on the ground.

'Please,' he croaked. 'I'm down here. Don't step on me.'

'Stand up.'

'I can't move. I've been shot.'

I heard the sigh of hinges behind me and turned to see Sylvie leaning on the barn door, watching.

'Go back to the house!' I yelled over my shoulder. 'Right now!'

Her feet scuttled on the gravel as she turned and ran.

‘Please,’ he said. ‘Help me.’

My hand was on the trigger and I swallowed, taking a moment to find my courage. I bent down and moved closer. He was breathing slowly. I reached out and touched his chest. It was wet with blood. I put on the safety and set the gun down on the ground, not thinking things through like my husband. Instead, I got closer and laid my finger on his neck, feeling for his pulse. There it was. Slow, but steady.

Who was he? English. Not wearing a uniform. I had to assume he was either a spy or a war prisoner fleeing France. The Germans at the border must have shot him. I knew the safest thing to do was to leave him here, just take Sylvie and walk to town. The authorities would come and take him away. Like a dead animal. He didn’t belong here. If he was still alive when they came, they’d take him to the prisoner of war camp over in Martigny. That was the proper course of action, but if I did report him, everyone in the village would know. They’d be talking about it for weeks. No one thinks I can run this sheep farm by myself. They’d say, *See what could happen up there, Anna? If that man hadn’t been wounded, you and your daughter might have been robbed or killed, or worse! A woman alone running a sheep farm isn’t right. It isn’t safe!*

‘Mama?’

I was startled back to the moment.

‘Sylvie, I told you not to come in here!’

Turning around I could see the dark shape of her at the barn door.

‘What is it?’ she asked. There was fear in her voice.

I closed my eyes a moment, trying to think. Then I made my decision.

‘Go to the shed and get the canvas sling, the one we use for the sheep. Hurry! Bring it here!’

She dashed off, giving me a little more time to think. Was I really going to help this man? The war had changed everything, changed us all, and not for the better. I realised I didn’t want to do the safest thing anymore. I wanted to do the right thing. I couldn’t just let this man die here alone.

I steadied myself. All right. *Make sure he isn’t armed.* I reached for the gun and moved close to him, patting his sides. No weapons. There was a lot of blood on his shoulder. I could see now this was where he was wounded, but I couldn’t tell how bad it was.

When Sylvie returned with the sling, we laid it out next to him.

‘It isn’t ideal but we have to move you on to this canvas and then take you to the house,’ I said to him. ‘It’s too dark in here for me to see and clean your wound properly. It isn’t far. We’ll go very slowly. Ready?’

‘Yeah,’ he grimaced.

‘Who is he, Mama?’ Sylvie whispered to me.

‘Don’t talk now. Help me. We have to get him on the sling.’

We avoided touching the wounded shoulder, but when I reached for his right leg, I found it too was sticky with blood. Another wound. I took his good right shoulder and Sylvie his left leg. We got our hands under him and lifted gently, slowly, inch by inch, until he was finally on the canvas. Once that was accomplished, we took hold of one end of the sling and dragged him at a snail’s pace across the yard.

I expected it to be difficult to get him up the steps to our chalet, but he was not as heavy as I thought. We managed to clear the stairs and get through the kitchen door. We moved him to a clear area on the wood floor and looked down at him in silence. He opened his eyes. They darted back and forth in a kind of delirium. In the light of the windows, I could see his face, covered in blood and dirt.

‘Are you still with us?’ I asked. He barred his teeth in a pained smile. He seemed almost feral. Maybe he was more animal than human after what he’d been through. Whatever it was, he’d risked his life to scale these mountains and had encountered the German sentries at the border. ‘We’re going to clean those wounds,’ I said, then turned to Sylvie. ‘You sit down beside him. I’ll get the water boiling.’ She sat on the floor next to his head, crossing her legs. I turned and got the biggest pot I could find, filled it with water from the pump and lit the stove. ‘I’m going back to the barn for a moment. Be right back.’ I turned to see my daughter’s face. She was terrified. I went over to her and took her hand. She must have wondered what I was doing bringing this dirty, bloody stranger into our home. What kind of mother did such a thing? But I had to retrieve that gun from the barn. It would make me feel a little more in control of this situation. ‘It will be all right.’ I said, stroking her hand. Leaning over, I whispered in her ear, ‘I need you to be strong so we can do this together. I won’t be a minute. Will you be all right?’

She stared at the man a moment. He’d closed his eyes. She squeezed my hand as she nodded once. I kissed her sweet blonde head and then headed for the barn.

‘Mama?’ Sylvie called after me. I stopped at the kitchen door and turned around.

‘Yes?’

‘What about school?’

‘Not today. I need you here.’

She nodded.

When I came back with the gun, my daughter was standing next to the sink, her eyes wide with fear.

‘He’s talking, Mama! What’s he saying?’

I touched her shoulder as I went past, came around the table and lifted the gun so it was pointing at him. He was blinking hard and fastened his stare on the barrel of the gun aimed at his chest.

‘I won’t hurt you. I just asked where you were... please...’

I felt ashamed, threatening a wounded man this way. I set the safety and laid the luger on the table. Then I took a deep breath to calm my nerves.

‘It’s all right, sweetheart,’ I said to Sylvie. ‘He speaks English. He just wanted to know where I was.’

I had Sylvie bring a pillow and we put it under his head.

‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘Merci.’

‘Why don’t you tell us your name?’ This would make him less frightening, wouldn’t it, that he had a name?

He hesitated.

‘Ben Moore.’

‘An English soldier?’

‘Yes, Ma’am.’ His face screwed up in pain.

‘We’ll talk later,’ I said. ‘Be still now.’

I got a stack of dish towels from the cupboard and plunged them into the hot water. Next, I instructed Sylvie to go to the storage shed and get my toolbox in case I needed to remove a bullet. She got up and ran out the back door.

‘I’m going stop the bleeding, then clean and dress the wounds. Were you hit from the front or behind?’

‘Behind.’

‘Looks like the bullet went right through your shoulder. It missed your scapula. That’s lucky. ‘But I’ll have to turn you on your side so I can where it went in and out.’ I got down on the floor next to him and turned him with care. His neck muscles strained at the effort. I could see he was in tremendous pain. The bullet may not have hit bone, but it could have done nerve damage. It would have been bleeding much worse if it hit a major vein. There was

so much I didn't know about this injury, about him. I hadn't thought beyond stopping the bleeding and bandaging him up. What exactly would I do with him after that? There was a bump as Sylvie came back through the door and put my toolkit on the table. 'Sweetheart, come over here and press this wet cloth on his back here. I'll press on the other side.'

He winced as we pressed and Sylvie was startled. She pulled back.

'Keep up the pressure. We want the bleeding to stop.'

She clenched her teeth and pushed on the wound, closing her eyes.

Once the bleeding lessened, I cleaned the area all around the wounds. The openings were fairly small, not bad enough to stitch closed. They would heal better without that. I'd cleaned up so many different kinds of wounds on the sheep, I felt confident about this decision. I made up a poultice of dried chamomile and honey and applied it. Finally, I got some empty cloth flour sacks I'd washed, folded and stored in the cupboard and cut them in strips, tied them together and wrapped his shoulder.

The wound on his leg was a serious graze just below the knee. No bullet was lodged there either, but muscle and cartilage had been torn away. Thankfully the knee joint wasn't damaged. No bones or veins smashed. I applied the poultice there too, after cleaning it, and wrapped it with bandages. I gave Sylvie the bloody dishtowels to soak in another pot of cold water and soap, then we cleaned the rest of the kitchen together, mopping up the blood and water. When I turned back to check on the soldier, he was sleeping soundly. I got a blanket from the wood chest and put it over him. Then I put my arms around Sylvie.

'You were so brave. I couldn't have done this without you.'

'It was like we were a hospital.'

'Luckily, his wounds were not too bad. We had what was needed to help him.'

'He'll be all right then?'

'I think so. We'll have to keep an eye on him for any sign of infection.'

'How long will he be here?'

I cleared my throat. 'I don't know, sweetheart.'

'Is he going to sleep there on the floor tonight?'

'I'll make up a bed for him on the sofa. We'll wake him a bit later and have him move there.'

The next morning, the sun was coming through the windows and I glanced around my kitchen. It had changed back from hospital ward to the familiar place of warmth and refuge it had always been—the centre of our life together as a family. It was where we ate our meals,

shared our thoughts, made plans. There were jars of nuts and seeds on the counter. Cannisters of tea, coffee, flour and sugar, oats and dried beans. The wood floor creaked as I walked across them. I knew every sound they made. While it was true the war had run down our supplies, we still had enough for our needs. We'd managed, Sylvie and I, with the help of our neighbours. We were running this farm together. At nine years old, Sylvie had been working right beside me, helping with the chores. I was so proud of her. These past few years she'd really grown up.

I went to the sofa to check on Ben. He was still sleeping. His face and hair were so dirty and caked with dried blood. Maybe I could do something about that. I heated water on the stove and put some in a bowl. Then I took it to the sofa with a clean cloth and a small bar of soap. I got down on my knees next to him and dipped the cloth into a bowl of hot water and wrung it out. His eyes remained closed. He must have been so tired after his ordeal. The sleep would do him good. I'd be careful not to wake him.

Very slowly, carefully, I wiped his forehead, nose, cheeks, chin, loosening the blood and dirt, then went over his face and neck again to find the pale skin underneath. I dirtied cloth after cloth as it all came away. When I wiped his eyelids, I noticed his long lashes. He looked so peaceful asleep like this. It felt intimate, this gesture of washing him, and for a moment I wondered if it might not be proper, doing this while he was sleeping. What would Johann think of me doing this? Seeing this soldier like this, so vulnerable, made me wonder about him. How had he come to be here? The tenderness of this act reminded me of the time I washed my dead mother's face, preparing her for burial.

Suddenly, his eyes sprung open and I drew back, caught in the act of this intimate gesture. His eyes were so blue and inquisitive. He blinked twice and then smiled at me in recognition. I bristled in embarrassment and pulled away. Perhaps he'd been awake all along.

'It feels good to be clean,' he murmured. 'Thank you...for all you've done for me. You saved my life.' I noticed then that he was handsome, and felt a pang of longing for my husband. Johann was older by a decade, at least. What would he have thought about this soldier, hiding in our barn? And what would he have said about my bringing him here, to our home, cleaning his wounds, washing his face?

I got up from the floor and stepped back.

'Are you hungry?'

'Oh, yes. Is that fresh bread I smell?'

'Just came out of the oven. Do you think you can come over to the kitchen table to eat? Let's see how you're doing with walking.'

He moved to sit up, like he had yesterday, when I took him to the privy. I could see the wound in his shoulder wasn't bleeding through the bandages. A good sign. I helped him move his legs over the side of the sofa. He screwed up his face when he had to stand. He couldn't put weight on the wounded leg yet, it would be a while before he could walk, but I helped him to the kitchen chair. I noticed again how thin he was, how emaciated. I could take most of his weight easily, though it was awkward. I had to avoid his shoulder. My arm was around his waist half lifting him. His dirty clothes smelled of sweat and dried blood and something else, something foul and musty.

'Where's your daughter?'

'At school.'

I lowered him into the chair and waited for him to ask about my husband. I knew it was coming. I'd been worried all night about how to address the subject of my husband. I just couldn't let this man know I was alone, not yet, not without knowing more about him and what he intended to do when he was able to walk again. I cut a slice of bread and put it on a plate and set it before him. He took it in both hands, then bit into it. Relief in the form of a broad smile spread across his face, his jaw working. He seemed to savour every morsel.

I sat across from him at the table as he ate. In just one day, everything had changed. This man, who'd been hiding in my barn, didn't feel like a threat any longer. Here I was treating him like a guest, sitting at my kitchen table. Johann's voice came to my mind so clearly it was like he was standing behind me. *When this man gets stronger, he could very well be a threat.* It was true. I knew it, but I disregarded the fact. Ignored it. Blatantly. One thing at a time, I told myself. He's not a threat today.

'After you eat, I can wash your hair. Give you a shave. It will make you more comfortable.'

He blinked and stared at me, as if he couldn't quite believe what I was saying.

'That would be...much appreciated.'

'You could wear some of my husband's clothes. The ones you have on might infect the wounds. We can't have that.'

'All right. Thank you.' His voice was shaky. 'I'm afraid, uh...you'll find I've got lice in my hair.' He took another bite of bread, as if he was afraid it might disappear.

'I can take care of that with some carbolic soap. Won't take long. We'll take off that shirt and sponge you off. I'll get the clothes.'

He continued eating the bread. Ravenous, like a starved man. If he was a prisoner, he probably didn't get nearly enough food. Climbing the stairs to my bedroom, I wondered why

he hadn't asked about my husband. Maybe he already suspected there wasn't one. I had to think about this. It might be that I wasn't fooling him at all.

When I opened the armoire there was the smell of cedar and moth balls. It brought images of Johann standing in our bedroom eyeing me as he got dressed. I took a shirt from the hangar and though the smell of him no longer lingered on his clothes, I pushed my nose against the shirt anyway and drew in a deep breath. What was I doing, surrendering my husband's clothes to this soldier, this foreigner? It wasn't just Johann's voice I was hearing now, but the voices of the whole town. What if someone saw him, wearing my husband's clothes? What would they think? I pulled a pair of trousers from the chest of drawers, underwear and socks. Then I picked up his hairbrush. Strands of his blonde hair were still in it. I shuddered with the pain of his absence. I had to be strong. The sooner I got his man healed of his wounds the sooner he'd be gone. My life would go back to normal. It had to. I retrieved the leather case with the shaving cream and razor and went back down the stairs.

Ben had eaten another piece of bread with some jam I left on the table. I put water on the stove and helped him take his tattered shirt off. We took everything slowly so as not to disturb his bandage or hurt his arm. I was self-conscious about cleaning his chest, abdomen, his arms and back. He was awake now. Watching me. I tried to look disinterested, like a nurse, but the truth was that I was moved by the number of cuts and wounds on him. His ribs were showing like an old homeless dog. He lowered his eyes when he saw mine linger.

When he was clean, I had him lean forward over a pot sitting on the floor, and close his eyes while I poured warm water over his head and soaped his hair. Having put on some rubber gloves, I tackled the nasty business of ridding his hair of lice. It took several rinses and a number of passes with a fine-tooth comb. In the sunlight coming from the window, I noticed a reddish tint to his hair and even this moved me. His hair. I dried it with a towel along with his upper body and had the same feeling return again, that he was as close to me as family. Next, I helped him put on the white linen shirt which intensified that feeling. It took a while to get his left arm into the armhole. The shirt was loose on him but the length was all right. He was the same height as Johann. There he stood wearing my husband's shirt. The one I had washed, pressed and sewed buttons onto for years.

'Ready for a shave?' I asked.

'Uh huh.'

He sat back down in the chair and watched with interest as I took out the razor and sharpened the blade. When it was ready, he put his head back and closed his eyes. I applied the shaving foam to his cheeks and chin, to the dip above his lip and his neck. It had been two

years since I'd given Johann a shave. It seemed like yesterday. My hands knew just what to do. The blade was sharp and ready, moving over every surface of his face.

I turned his head gently, this way and that, razored off large swathes of his beard and rinsed the blade in hot water. After I finished and dried his face, the transformation was complete. I stood staring at the change in him. He looked younger and human now. He was no longer an animal but a real person. Someone's son. Maybe even someone's husband.

I placed the shaving mirror in his good hand and he grinned at the image of himself. He stroked his chin, then lowered the mirror and held my stare.

'Where is your husband?'

I held my hands together tight, my eyes down. It was shameful that I'd put him out of my mind, that I'd pretended he just wasn't here at the moment. I wanted to remain in this make-believe world, the one with just me, Sylvie and Ben. But now I had to bring my husband into it. I would say his name. That would help me. I didn't know what else to say.

'Johann. His name was Johann. He died two years ago.'

Ben lowered his head.

'I'm sorry. It must be hard here, without him. Who tends the sheep?'

I crossed my arms. Was he going to judge me too? Did he think I couldn't do this?

'My neighbour helps me sometimes. And before he comes around asking questions, I need to know what you intend to do now.'

'Yes, we need to talk about that.'