

The Day Of The Swans



Chapter 1

ANNA

It was the kind of morning Anna loved: an azure blue sky with a hint of spring budding on the ash trees in Cavendish Square as she walked through the small park towards Wigmore Street. In spite of the diseased smell of traffic; the cacophony of taxis circling the square and the jostle of pedestrians focused on work, all Anna could think of was the previous night. She and Tim had indulged in athletic love-making for hours and they'd both got up late. She smiled to herself as she weaved a path through the stationary cars and taxis; she didn't notice the numerous men staring at her because men had been staring at her all her life. But she noticed Max, her American supervisor, treading carefully up the steps of the clinic in the distance. She weaved around the last car, eager to reach the clinic; determined to discover why 33 year old Kieran O'Reilly was so nervous.

The clinic was a haven after the bustle of the street; such a contrast from her last placement in an NHS hospital with its peeling paint, worn curtains and overworked staff. No wonder the clients felt stressed in such places, Anna thought. She wished she could show Government Health Officials how much more beneficial it was for everyone to be treated in such a tranquil environment.

Marie, the receptionist, was sitting at her desk coping with a number of clients in her usual calm manner. Anna often wondered if Marie was employed by the clinic solely because she sedated the clients with tranquillity.

'Hi, Anna. Kieran's waiting for you in your office.' Marie smiled her enigmatic Mona-Lisa smile before answering the telephone.

'Thanks,' Anna said, picking up a file. She walked along the carpeted corridor towards the small, neat office she had been

working in for four months. It wasn't really her office, but it always gave her pleasure when Marie called it hers. Kieran O'Reilly had been her first client after she had applied for a placement in the clinic and had asked to be supervised by Dr. Max Paris after reading his numerous articles in *The Psychologist*. She wanted to be supervised by a man with vast experience and great insight into people's minds. Max had asked her to video some of her sessions with clients so he could watch the way she interacted with them. So far, he'd liked what he had seen, he told her. She only had two months left of her placement and if Max gave her a positive assessment she'd be a fully certified Clinical Psychologist in nine months. She knew her parents would be proud of her; but then they always were – whatever she did.

Anna opened the door of the office and smiled at Kieran who crouched, taut with tension, on the edge of a wooden chair. She had to find a way to make her relax.

'Hello, Kieran. Isn't it a beautiful day?'

Kieran's eyes darted from the ground to the window in surprise and Anna realised she hadn't noticed that the sun was shining.

Anna sat down, unperturbed by Kieran's lack of reply. She hadn't spoken at all during their first session together. This had worried her a lot at the time, but when she'd talked about it with Max, he'd told her about a client he'd once had who didn't speak for three sessions. Then all his problems spilled out of him like an oil slick.

Anna watched Kieran twisting her lank, brown hair around an index finger like a vulnerable child.

'Do you remember me asking you to write a journal?'

Kieran nodded, but didn't make eye contact.

'Did you write one?'

'Yes.'

'Can I read it?'

Reluctantly, Kieran opened the small bag she clutched on her

lap as if Anna was about to rip it away from her. She brought out a small cheap notebook and gave it to Anna without looking at her. Her hand shook slightly.

MONDAY

Today Anna told me to write a journal about my thoughts but it's difficult as I don't know what to write about but I have to must write something. But what?

TUESDAY

Very nervous. What can I write about? Nothing ever happens to me.

WEDNESDAY

Didn't sleep last night. Worried about writing the journal.

FRIDAY

Feeling ill. Couldn't write yesterday. Can't write today.

SATURDAY

I went for a walk.

SUNDAY

What will happen when Anna finds out that I haven't written anything?

Anna looked up from the journal and smiled into Kieran's tense face.

'But you have written something, haven't you?'

For the second time that morning, Kieran registered surprise.

'You've said you had to write because I told you to. Did you always do what you were told to as a child?'

'Yes,' she answered in a quiet, lilting voice.

'Always?'

'Always.'

'Were your parents pleased about that?'

'Pleased?' Kieran frowned at Anna as if she'd never heard of the word before. 'I think they were, but I don't know.'

It was Anna's turn to be surprised. Parents who didn't show

pleasure. She thought how incredibly lucky she'd been to have her parents; parents who showed her how much they loved her when she was growing up.

'So what made them happy?' Anna asked her.

Kieran thought about the question for a long time before answering. 'When I played by myself without bothering them.'

Bothering them? Anna thought. The parents are the problem, not Kieran.

'Didn't you like playing by yourself?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

Kieran's forehead furrowed again. 'I didn't know what to do.'

Anna tried to work out what she meant. 'You didn't know how to play?'

'No, I knew how to play, but I needed them to tell me what to do first.'

It suddenly came to Anna. 'You don't like making decisions.'

'I hate making them,' Kieran whispered.

'You preferred your parents making them for you.'

'Yes,' she answered.

'Do you know why, Kieran?'

For the first time, Kieran glanced at her before answering. 'Yes. I might make the wrong ones and then what would happen?'

'What do you think would happen?' Anna asked her gently.

'I'd make the wrong ones and then my parents would leave me.'

The Italian café in Barrett Street was small and intimate and served good, reasonably priced food. It was hidden down a small pedestrianised area so it was always possible to find an empty table. Lunch had become an integral part of Anna's training. She and Max met there every Thursday to discuss her progress and

air any problems she might have. She saw Max through the small paned windows, studying the menu as usual, and yet he always had the same lunch – a prawn sandwich.

He glanced up at her as she sat down opposite him and placed her assessment report on the red and white checked table cloth in front of him.

‘Finished it already?’ Max smiled at her, his grey eyes creasing in the corners. He looked all of his fifty-one years in the spring sunlight which suddenly slanted through the window. ‘That’s very quick.’ He opened the report and scanned its contents, oblivious to the noise coming from the kitchen. Luigi, the Italian chef was arguing with his wife Alexandra again.

‘I think Kieran’s got Dependent Personality Disorder. She can’t make a decision without her parent’s approval, especially her father’s. She’s still living with them and she’s nearly 35.’

She pointed to a section in the report in case Max would miss its relevance. He looked at her pointedly.

‘Sorry,’ she muttered. Perhaps she was suffering from a dependent personality too. She was desperate for Max’s approval.

Anna was always amazed by the speed at which Max read. Not only read, but assimilated information and pinpointed any deficiencies in Anna’s diagnosis. Perhaps they taught speed reading in America, she thought. She pretended to study the menu whilst studying him, noticing how his eyes narrowed as they raced from line to line. He was nearly at the end of the report before he frowned. Anna tensed. What had she written?

He looked up at her and said: ‘So what are you having?’

‘What?’ Anna hadn’t looked at the menu. ‘Oh, the same as you.’

Alexandra, the waitress came over, her face relaxing as she saw Max. People always relaxed when they saw him. ‘Dr. Paris – it wonderful to see you. Not like him in kitchen.’ She glared over at the kitchen door where Luigi was banging every pot and pan they owned.

Anna wondered why Max chose such a noisy place to come to eat.

‘We’ll have two prawn sandwiches, Alexandra. Tell Luigi to think of his blood pressure.’

‘Blood pressure! That man he have no blood pressure! He - a Sicilian!’

‘Tell him I know as much about blood pressure as he does about food. He needs to relax if he doesn’t want a heart attack.’

‘I tell him, but he no listen.’ She flounced off to argue with him again.

Max and Anna smiled at each other.

‘I wonder why they stay together,’ Anna mused. The kitchen now sounded like a battle zone.

‘They love each other,’ Max answered, staring out of the window.

Sadness shifted over his face like a cloud, but at that moment, Anna was more interested in what he thought of her report than his sadness.

‘So, what do you think?’ She tried to sound casual.

‘It’s detailed.’

‘Yes, but do you agree with my diagnosis?’

Max smiled at her. ‘Always so direct. Sure you’re not American? Yes, I agree. She’d be a good candidate for hypnosis. Trances can be very useful clinically. Remember how Milton Erickson used a technique called confusion? He said things on the surface which seemed logically contradictory, conveyed an ingenious creative truth. I’ll get one of the –’

‘I’ve studied and practised hypnosis for two years, Max. Can I do it?’ Anna knew she was speaking too fast, but she desperately wanted to help Kieran and if her hypnosis helped her become independent of her parents she’d get a higher assessment rating. They would both benefit.

She waited as Max studied her face for some time before answering. ‘Do you think you can really help her?’

There was something in Max's expression that stopped her from saying *yes* confidently. 'I don't know, but I'll try my best,' she said simply.

'What supervisor could ask for more? You can start hypnosis next week.'

Anna's face flushed with pleasure. 'That's the best news I've had today. Thanks, Max.'

'How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb?' Max said seriously.

Anna stared at him in confusion. Was this some sort of test?

'It's a joke,' Max said, smiling at her.

Anna felt relief flood through her. 'I don't know.'

'Only one, but the bulb must really want to be changed,' Max said. 'Remember that when you see Kieran.'

Alexandra brought their sandwiches and smiled at Max. 'I tell Luigi what you say about blood pressure, Dr.'

'And what did he say?'

'He shout and shout, so he don't hear. Then I shout and shout, then he listen and stop shouting. A miracle, I tell him.' Alexandra made the sign of the cross before walking off.

From the kitchen they heard Luigi singing.

'You should charge them, Max. They'd have killed each other months ago if it wasn't for you.'

'I don't think so,' he answered tersely.

Anna glanced at him quickly. He was frowning. She realised that Max didn't need compliments from a trainee. He'd published a vast collection of books and articles on Clinical Psychology and was an authority on Personality Disorders. What an incredible stroke of luck for her that he'd moved from New York to London all those years ago. But perhaps she'd aimed too high asking for his supervision. What if he gave her a poor grade for her thesis?

'So, how's the thesis progressing?' Max asked, as if reading her thoughts.

Knowing that Max was going to grade her thesis had forced Anna to focus on her research and writing, but it also gave her a great deal of pressure. She was determined not to reveal how much she still had to write. Max had helped her find a topic that had been under-researched. She was writing her thesis on *The Effectiveness of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy in Treating Gender-Related Depression*. She found it fascinating researching the differences between the male and female triggers for jealousy: the males feeling more jealous over sexual infidelity, while females being more threatened by emotional infidelity.

She looked at him confidently. 'Okay. I'm concentrating on how past aggressive behaviour in relationships is an indicator of future aggression at the moment.' Max often saved her hours of research by pointing her in the direction of the right books and journals to check. She hoped he'd do so again.

'Have a look at the MacArthur Study of Mental Disorder and Violence conducted in the States by Monahan. There's an interesting section on aggressive clients. You'll find it useful.'

'Okay. I'll have a look tonight.' Anna tried to look as if she meant it. She'd never have time tonight. She was going to see *Romeo and Juliet* at the National with Tim and her parents. She smiled as she thought of Tim's recurring quotation in their bedroom:

"For I never saw true beauty til this night." Then he'd undress her. Slowly. Anna was suddenly aware that Max was giving her a strange look. 'Sorry...where were we?'

'Your thesis. You know I need it on my desk before your placement ends.'

Anna felt her heart race. God – how on earth was she going to finish it in two months? 'No probs,' she said casually.

Max winced and Anna suddenly remembered Marie telling her how Max hated slang. He certainly wasn't a typical American. 'Sorry, I'll have it on your desk in six weeks. Without fail.'

Max gave her a small smile. 'A little better, if over-confident.'

He took another bite out of his sandwich and ate it slowly before saying, 'I've got a potential new client for you. The last client of your placement.'

Anna always felt a frisson of excitement when Max mentioned a new client. It was a challenge to be able to discover what their real problem was, but he'd never used the word 'potential' before.

'Why potential?'

Max always gave Anna some background into a client's history before letting her see him or her, but this time he was reticent.

'He told me ...'

Max frowned as he ate the last portion of his sandwich. Anna suddenly realised that it wasn't eating that had stopped him speaking, but something else. Something she hadn't seen on his face before...puzzlement.

'He told you what?' She asked, very curious.

'He told me he was depressed.'

'So why are you puzzled?'

'Because dear, direct Anna – everything about the man negates depression.'

'Has he filled in one of the questionnaires?' The clinic had many questionnaires but Anna knew that Max preferred the Hamilton Rating Scale; he believed it was more accurate in measuring the severity of a client's depressive state than Becks.

'No. He said he didn't like questionnaires. I warn you now – he's not going to be easy. His demeanour, body language and speech all negate depression.'

'I wonder why he said he was then.'

'That's what you've got to find out.'

'Is he going to be very difficult, do you think?'

'I think he'll be challenging.'

Anna thought fast. Max had never said a client was challenging before, but if he had suggested that she should treat

him, he must have confidence in her abilities. But was she ready for such a challenge?

‘Perhaps he needs your experience, Max.’

‘He doesn’t want my experience. There must be a reason for that. Do you want to see him?’

‘What’s he like?’ she asked him.

‘Like? That’s a very vague term. He’s intelligent and plays word games. Do you want to take him on?’

‘I need another client to complete my placement, don’t I?’

Max nodded as he wiped his hands on a paper napkin. ‘Yes, I’ve just said that, but it doesn’t have to be him.’

‘Would you offer me a permanent job if I do?’ Anna said, without thinking.

Max looked stunned by her request and Anna realised how crass the question must have sounded. She clenched her hands under the table in embarrassment. Why would he want to work with a woman who spoke before her brain was engaged? He liked dispassionate thinking.

‘I don’t do deals with trainees. Come on. Back to work.’

Max moved over to Alexandra to say goodbye before Anna could apologize. She stood up slowly, feeling a bit shaky. She’d blown her chances.

‘Arrivederci.’ Alexandra and Luigi called in unison. They stood in front of the kitchen holding hands. ‘See you next Thursday.’

Anna glanced at Max who was holding the door open for her. She couldn’t tell from his face whether there would be any more Thursdays.

‘Lunch was great,’ Anna said as they walked out into the street.

She glanced at Max as they turned into Wigmore Street. He was staring ahead with an inscrutable expression on his face. She’d obviously annoyed him. If only I could retract time, she thought.

‘Your new client says he’s a painter,’ Max suddenly said.

‘Says?’

‘Well, I could say I’m a brain surgeon, but I’m not. Be prepared for invention, that’s what I’m saying,’ Max answered as they walked past the Wigmore Hall.

‘Why don’t you say he lies?’ She’d done it again. Questioned him as if she knew as much as him.

‘Because I don’t know if he does, that’s why. Just be prepared.’

‘Like a boy scout?’ Anna asked him, making a mock scout salute as they crossed the road together. Max suddenly smiled before grabbing her arm to stop her from colliding with a slow-moving car.

‘Carry on like that Anna Nash and you won’t be meeting any clients ever again.’ Max guided her onto the pavement. ‘Didn’t your parents ever teach you about the green cross code?’

‘The what?’ Anna asked.

‘It was a UK government programme devised in the 70s to make children stop, look and listen before they crossed a road. I read about it in the States.’

‘I was born in 1988, Max.’

‘All right, so you don’t read history. Now stop making me feel old.’

She grinned at him. ‘But you are,’ she said instinctively. It was the sort of thing she said to her parents all the time, but Max wasn’t a parent. He was her boss. She glanced at him nervously, waiting for him to frown, but all he did was smile. Max must be the most secure person I know, Anna thought with relief; he obviously didn’t care he was middle-aged. Anna hoped she felt the same when she was older.

‘So, any more details about the new client?’ she asked hopefully.

‘I told you, I haven’t got any. It’s your job to discover what’s wrong with him.’

‘Okay,’ Anna said, determined to prove to Max that she was worth employing. A sudden thought occurred to her. ‘Is he on medication?’

Max frowned as they sauntered towards the clinic. ‘He says he’s not, but-’

‘Be prepared for invention?’

They smiled at each other as they walked into the clinic.

Marie was sitting in her usual, relaxed position at reception. ‘I sent the new client up to Anna’s office, Max. Was that all right?’

‘That’s fine, Marie. Can you give Anna his file?’ He turned to Anna. ‘Not that there’s much information in it.’

Anna took the thin file off Marie and sprinted up the stairs. ‘See you later, Max.’

‘Come to see me after you’ve seen him.’ Max called to her.

‘Okay!’ Anna shouted back.

If only she had known who was waiting for her in her office, she’d never have left the café; never have sprinted up the stairs with so much youthful enthusiasm, but she didn’t. She hurried along the carpeted corridor, humming quietly to herself, blissfully unaware that she was about to meet a man who was going to ravage her life.

Chapter 2

STEFAN

I've almost finished the painting. It evokes your shadow, but not your substance. I can't capture that. And the sea was almost as difficult to orchestrate as you. I couldn't sculpt the waves or harmonize the shades of greens and blues and whites exactly. It must be exactly as it was. As I remember. It was a warm spring morning. Not usual for May. Was it May? No, it was a mild spring April morning and we were walking along the beach together. There was a light breeze. Then why weren't the waves flickering? The air was still.

'The sea tired, Stefan,' you said.

It was moving so slowly that day. Only the hint of ripples over the sea-shore. Our bare feet left yellow footprints: two big, two small.

You said 'my feet small.' I said 'They are perfect.'

And they were. *You* were perfect. *Are* perfect.

You pointed to the cliffs – your hand a dimpled starfish – and said 'How so high, Stefan?' And I said 'A giant made them high so he'd have something to jump over.'

And you laughed and the sun shone on your witchery of copper hair and I loved you more at that moment than I'd ever done before.

The painting is reflected hundreds of times in the mirrors. Hundreds of us walking along the sands forever; hundreds of you laughing up at me. Memories move like bright wings and fly around inside my head. In the distance, the limestone cliffs of your childhood slumber. A wedge of swans fly over our heads, shadowing your hair with hints of old gold and you shout out with excitement.

'Look Stefan! Look! Look!' But I don't look up. I look at the joy on your face and know it must be reflected in mine.

A lone horsewoman gallops across the sands in the distance, but you don't see her because you suddenly notice a profusion of shells littering the sand. We collected hundreds that day and took them home to Bach Têg, our beautiful white house.

Do you remember? We made a collage of shells in your bedroom. Large blue mussels, yellow and orange cockle shells and fan-like scallops. We made a picture of our house, standing on top of the cliff with the sea-gulls wheeling below us and the sky spinning above us. And beside the house, you put our cardboard father.

'Where's mother?' I asked you.

'She inside house, playing piano, silly,' you said, smiling at me.

And my heart sang.