

anna

by ianBK



7 eyes
17 he
27 she
33 revelation
43 me

anna

by ianBK

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

This work contains violence, gore, adult language, suggestive situations and themes that may not be appropriate for young children or ideological extremists.

©2017 Ian Anderson Oliver
ianbk.com



eyes

Helpless.

I can't find any other words to describe the way I felt that night. No set of syllables could ever begin to communicate the feelings that overtook me. "Horror" is not horrible enough, nor "Terror" adequately terrifying. "Agony" doesn't convey the sense of twisted disgust that crawled through my bowels.

All these words fall so far short of their intent, that using them as descriptors of the incident feels dishonest.

No use attempting to put words to the emotions. If the ghosts of Shakespeare and Hemingway possessed me, I still could never conjure the proper prose. Unless you actually lived that night through my soul, you could never relate to it.

"Helpless", however, serves as a fitting descriptor. It may not carry the aura crushing desperation of the evening, but no one could contest its accuracy.

Helplessly, I stared into my daughter's eyes as the life drained from her body. Powerless to prevent her

anna

spirit from exiting the world in which I exist, I could help her not.

Helplessly, I stood by and observed. Frozen, as if staring up at a scene from the most haunting horror film imaginable. I wanted desperately to tear through the silver screen and prevent the unspeakable crime that occurred before my eyes, but my body refused to respond. Instead, I did the only thing I could do. I watched.

I frantically attempted to commit to my memory any details about the perpetrator that could be used to identify him later. Perhaps I would notice a tattoo, or a scar. Possibly a crooked nose or a broken smile?

No.

I could do none of that.

Helpless.

Once again, completely and indefensibly helpless.

I could only focus on his eyes. In them, I saw something incomparable to anything I had witnessed before. A vile anthropomorphism of discontent. Animosity personified. Hatred in human form.

The eyes of my daughter's killer displayed an intoxicating indifference for all things capable of bringing beauty to a dark world. A description would serve no purpose. I doubted not for a second that I stared into the brimstone pupils of the devil himself. I had no power over my body or mind. I could not fight or struggle. I could not escape or even look away. To

this day I can recall not a single tangible detail of the night's events. I remember nothing but the paralyzing eyes of the killer, strangling my daughter's neck until her precious spirit ceased to occupy her body.

Of course, no one believed me. Why would they? I couldn't present a single piece of evidence other than a vague and supernatural eyewitness account. According to investigators, not single piece of forensic evidence presented itself at the crime scene to implicate anyone other than myself. Not a strand of hair, not a fingerprint, and not so much as a microscopic sliver of fabric left behind by the true offender. All traces of his existence vanished into the ether from which he had arrived.

I had nothing. Only those eyes. The eyes of a demon. Burned into my memory.

I must have sounded like a crazed loon to arresting officers. I pleaded and begged for them to release me, but they would barely even pretend to listen. Every now and again, I would receive a polite head nod or a promise to "look into" the validity of my testimony. They would only acknowledge speech that came from my lawyers.

Fortunately, I had a modest savings packed away, which I no longer needed. Before the incident, I had motivation to save. I wanted to earn enough that my precious little girl would never have to worry about paying for school. I knew it would take everything I had, but I believe a father has a responsibility to provide an education for his child.

Thanks to the work of our devilish madman, she would never receive that opportunity. I languished at the

anna

thought of handing her college funds over to a group of vulturous lawyers, but I had no other hope for it now. These men, fitted to the tees in pinstriped suits and Armani jackets, represented my only shot at remaining a free man. The only avenue towards the goal that now consumed my mind. Vengeance.

I want nothing more than to peer into those horrible eyes once more. I long only for the day that I can stare into them as the life chokes out. I want to gaze upon his suffering. If I can share with him even the smallest fraction of the eternal grief he has caused me, I will count it as a victory.

I can do none of that, however, if the authorities see it fit to lock me away. Not only can I not bear the thought of the world blaming me for his dreadful crimes, but if forced to serve my tormentor's punishment, I would have no chance at avenging my daughter. I must remain free!

So I hand the money over. Dollar by dollar, I watch my baby girl's fortune fall into the hands of my team of defense attorneys. The best ones my money can buy.

My legal team fought valiantly to avoid a prison sentence, but they fought an uphill battle with the evidence stacked against me. In the end, they had to resort to using a technicality to get me off with a sentence of indefinite house arrest. A far cry from true freedom, and a definite obstacle to my plans. No matter. The comfort of my home would offer all the freedom I needed to plot my revenge.

I knew my daughter's true killer still roamed the streets, and I couldn't exactly go out looking. The moment I left my home, a tracking device in my leg would alert law enforcement, and they'd chase me down and throw me in a box. I didn't know who or what to look for anyway. If I had my freedom, I'd probably waste it wandering in the streets. Perhaps my house arrest sentence would actually serve my agenda. It would force me to focus on the scene of the crime.

I knew the place that held the greatest potential for discovering evidence sat just ten feet above my living room. The police had combed my daughter's bedroom from top to bottom when they investigated her murder, but I had yet to work up the nerve to inspect the scene for myself.

For weeks after the murder, I couldn't even bring myself to walk up the stairs. I spent most of my time in the fetal position, cowering in the darkness underneath a pile of blankets. I only saw daylight when forced to meet with my lawyers or attend court dates. My contributions to these matters amounted to little more than a shuddering mess of mumbled sentences. After the trial, I had more time to myself. My hardened heart pined for nothing more than finding my daughter's killer, but my soul needed time to mourn. I spent long hours sitting and staring into the fireplace, imagining the burning hell to which I would send the perpetrator when I finally found him.

The staircase had become an adversary of its own in the months following my loss. The arthritis in my ankles began to flare up worse and worse as I aged.

anna

Despite my sedentary lifestyle, I constantly found myself nursing new aches and pains in my ankles and knees. On many long days, only the soothing warmth of an Epsom footbath could ease the pains that torment my body and soul. So often I sat, soaking my feet and contemplating the gentle flicker of the flames.

When I finally psyched myself into making the climb, I stood in front of the bedroom door for ninety minutes, just staring at the knob. I would allow my hand to hover over it, but eventually returned to my living room armchair without ever turning the handle.

Three more times I made the attempt before I psyched myself into opening the door and walking through it. Upon entering the room, I realized my fears had no justification. The pastel pink walls calmed my rage, and the intricately designed doll collection distracted me from the gruesome memories the room contained.

I could hardly imagine that such an unspeakable tragedy had ever occurred here.

I had hoped immersing myself back into the crime scene would trigger my subconscious brain to retrieve suppressed imagery from the event. Instead, the room only brought back beautiful memories of the family that built itself there.

The bed remained immaculately made from the morning before the crime. Anna had done it perfectly. Not a ruffle in the bedspread. A body-length dressing mirror shined without a streak. As clear as gazing into

another room. I couldn't bring myself to stare into it directly. I didn't want to look at myself.

Every doll on her shelf sat perfectly straight, their outfits pressed smooth. She would have never allowed one to spend a day looking less than its best. Even in the spot where she took her last breath, the dark oak floorboards shined brilliantly enough for a princess to walk on. Not an item in the room showed a blemish.

I nearly tore the place apart searching for anything that might point me in the direction of the killer. I carefully undressed and dismantled each doll. I made sure to keep all the pieces in order so I could put them back together just as my precious baby girl left them. I stripped the bed and combed over every sheet and comforter. I dug through drawers and rummaged through jewelry boxes. In the entire room I only managed to find one item out of place.

I had nearly given up when I spotted it. In a last desperate attempt, I pressed my chest down to the ground in a push up position. I could almost smell the scent of my beautiful daughter as I laid my body down on top of her final resting place. I turned my head to the left and scanned beneath her bed. Nothing. Not so much as a misplaced sock had fallen to the ground. Most children lost enough merchandise under their bed to open a chain of department stores. Not my Anna. She never left anything out of place.

I defeatedly turned to the right and caught a brief glimmer of light popping out from beneath her jewelry counter.

anna

I slowly rotated my head back and forth until I saw the light flash again. It came from deep beneath the dresser. I pressed my body tight to the floor and reached underneath, as far as my broad shoulders would allow. My fingertips fumbled against a cold, hollow metal circle. I tightened as much of my index and middle finger as I could around the ring and struggled for a moment before I finally managed to move it in my direction. As soon as I could wrap my palm around it, I knew exactly what I held in my hand.

I pulled myself to my feet and opened my hand to reveal the one carat VVS stone that I had given to Anna's mother on the day I asked her to marry me.

I hadn't seen Anna's mother in over seven years. We did not end our relationship on speaking terms. Though our love for each other had dulled, the diamond in the center of the ring still shone as brightly as the day I first saw it. I recalled the heated legal battle that had taken place after our divorce, regarding which of us had rights to keep the ring. After all that, I couldn't imagine she would have left it behind on accident. She certainly wouldn't have left the heirloom in possession of our only daughter. In her mind, no one, including myself, could prove less worthy of possessing the stone than Anna.

I couldn't ponder a logical explanation as to how the ring could have made its way back into Anna's bedroom. My wife despised Anna and I's relationship, but I'd never have pictured her as a potential suspect. Nonetheless, I knew the ring represented much more than the memory of a lost love. I held in my hand the first clue in my quest for my daughter's vengeance.

he

I knew I would marry Becca from the first day I met her. She possessed all the qualities I looked for in a woman. Strong, independent, responsible, determined. She had the attitude of a go-getter, and never backed down from a challenge. I always felt lucky that a girl like her would give me the time of day, let alone take an interest in someone like me. I didn't wait long before I bought her the biggest, shiniest diamond engagement ring I could afford. My heart nearly beat out of my chest on the night that I asked her to marry me. If not for the fact I had already dropped to one knee, my legs might have buckled out from underneath me the moment she said "yes". I thanked my lucky stars as I slid that ring onto her perfectly manicured finger.

Not more than a dozen months after our wedding day, we welcomed a beautiful baby boy into our family. We named him Andrew, after his maternal grandfather, a hero who gave his life fighting in the Vietnam war. I never thought I could love anything more than I loved Becca, until Andy came along and blew that theory out of the water. During the first years of Andy's life, the three of us shared more happy memories than even the greatest saints could ever deserve to experience. We

anna

filled our home with love until our cups runneth over. I can't remember a happier time. I doubt one exists in the history of the world.

After five incredible years together, we sent Andrew off to Kindergarten with tears in our eyes. We both lamented the idea of our baby boy growing up, but rejoiced when we all reunited at 5:30 each afternoon. Our happy life continued until halfway through the school year, when things slowly began to change.

One day in late October, I noticed Andy's favorite toy lying outside near the garbage pile. I had purchased him the combat figurine a year earlier at a boxing match. I know, exposing a four-year old to a violent combat sport might not earn any parent of the year nominations, but my buddies at work couldn't stop talking about this fighter. They all took their kids, and I couldn't pass up the chance to enjoy some quality father-son time with the guys. Even as a non-sports fan, I couldn't help but appreciate what I witnessed in the ring that night. A guy no younger than myself overcame staggering odds to score an upset victory for the ages. The energy in the room had us all in high spirits. Andy appeared equally fascinated with the action, although I doubt he understood the significance of the event in sports history. To tell the truth, I didn't fully understand it either, but it seemed to make my son happy. As we passed the merchandise tent on our way out, I noticed him eyeballing the action figures crafted in the winning fighter's image. The other boys begged their fathers to purchase one, but my co-workers all balked at the \$35 price tag. The other kids whined and hissed at their parents. They raised hell for a solid ten minutes before

the other fathers finally said their goodbyes and dragged the little brats off to their cars. Despite his obvious desire for the toy, my Andy never made a peep. He simply thanked me for bringing him to the fight and said that he hoped we could do it again sometime soon. His appreciation and lack of entitlement melted my heart. In less than a moment, I marched over to the tent and threw down the \$35 without batting an eye. I knew I would blow my weekly family budget by purchasing the toy on top of the outrageously priced boxing tickets, but I didn't care. When I handed that toy to my incredibly grateful and appreciative son, I felt like I had delivered the knockout blow in front of a sold out crowd. I was the hero!

Andy cherished that toy. I would often find his other toys scattered about the living room, or step on them in the hallway in the middle of the night, but not this one. The fighter never left his side. For that reason, I found it odd that he would have nearly allowed the garbage man to run off with it. The beloved toy sat soaking in a muddy puddle, his bright red cloth wrist accessories had soiled to a dull brown. It broke my heart.

I picked the toy out of the garbage pile and stormed inside and up the stairs to Andy's room. I found him sitting on the side of his bed with his legs crossed in what looked like an uncomfortable position. He normally couldn't focus his attention on one thing for more than a few short seconds, but today he stared silently at the wall. A truly unnerving sight.

“Andy, I found your favorite toy outside next to the garbage can. You must have looked everywhere for him.”

anna

“I know,” Andy replied in a lifeless tone that sent goosebumps across my arms.

“Wh- what do you mean you know?”

“I left him out there.”

My heart broke all over again.

“Andy, this is your favorite toy. Do you want to explain to me why you would leave it outside in the rain? The garbage man could have mistakenly taken it away with the trash.”

“I know,” Andy replied again.

I nearly hit the ground harder than the champion we watched fall in the ring. What could have caused my boy to lose interest in his favorite toy so suddenly? Had something happened at school? Could the other kids have bullied him? Or did I do something to cause him to lash out?

“Andy, I- I don’t understand. Why would you do this? Daddy spent a lot of money to get you this. You need to take better care.”

“That’s not *my* toy,” he replied.

“What? It looks exactly like yours... who does this belong to?”

“That toy is for boys!” Andy said, shouting angrily back at me now.

A chill ran down my neck. I froze in disbelief at what I heard. I must have misinterpreted. Why on Earth

would my son call his favorite plaything a “toy for boys”? I didn’t know what to do next. Andy continued to stare blankly at the wall. He neglected to acknowledge my obvious distress, treating me like a stranger in his room. I gathered myself and brushed off his strange behavior. I went to the bathroom and washed the dirt off of the toy. I squeezed the muddy water out of the fabrics and ran them through the washing machine. I used a dishcloth to wipe away the remaining traces of filth, and polish the figurine until it looked as good as new. After Andy went to sleep, I silently snuck back into his room and tucked the toy into bed with him, just the way he normally kept it. I figured that whatever he had gone through today, he would want his hero by his side when he woke up the next morning.

I couldn’t stop thinking about the incident the next day at work. I sat on pins and needles for nine hours, unable to focus on my daily tasks. I stared at the clock, counting the minutes until I could go home and spend time with my family. I prayed our lives would revert to their normal, happy state. To my great relief, I came home to see Andy sitting on Becca’s lap, action figure in hand as she read to him in the voice of his comic hero. I decided to write off his odd behavior, attributing it to a bad mood or something he had seen on television. I vowed to take more caution over which programs we allowed him to watch before bed.

In the following weeks, our beautiful lives continued as planned. I almost forgot about the ordeal until a month later, when I came home and saw the toy in the garbage can for a second time. I pulled it out and brought it inside. I furiously cleaned and polished it

anna

before barging into Andy's room. By this time, Andy had already fallen asleep again, so I simply placed the toy on the shelf and left him to sleep.

I sulked down the stairs to see my beautiful wife sitting in the living room reading the latest issue of *The National Review*. I decided to tell her about what had happened with Andy and the toy. She chuckled and flipped to the back of her magazine.

“He probably just wants you to buy him a new one,” she said, pointing to an advertisement that spread across the entire page.

The ad featured a new-and-improved version of the toy I had purchased him. The fighter had, against all odds, managed to defend his title three times that year. He quickly became a household name, and every kid in the Southern United States wanted his action figure. The ad boasted about the newest model, featuring “Heavy-Hand Haymaker Action”, and “Three classic catchphrases”.

“Don't worry,” she assured me, “He's just going through a phase.”

He never grew out of that phase. On Christmas morning he opened up his new and improved action hero figurine. I expected him to jump for joy. Instead, he tossed it aside and scowled at me and his mother.

“That's a boy's toy!” Andy yelled at me for the second time.

I glanced over at Becca. I had hidden this detail about Andy's incident from her when I first told her

about it. I could tell from the look on her face that she hadn't heard this remark before.

"Excuse me?" She responded in a tone unlike any I had heard from her before, "What is that supposed to mean, young man?"

"I'm not a boy, I'm a girl!" Andy shouted back.

This response set off the nuclear explosion that would eventually destroy our home.

"Like hell you are!" Becca responded in a fury uncharacteristic of a good Christian woman like herself.

Becca had a strong, no nonsense personality. She could whip the strongest man into place without more than a whisper. I'd never seen my normally charming southern belle raise her voice to anyone. Andy's behavior crossed a line she had not prepared to cede. With the principals she founded her family on in jeopardy, she suddenly become death, destroyer of worlds. The fight wore on, from Christmas morning, nearly until New Year's eve. None of us had experienced anything quite like it. When Andy finally went back to school, I called for a cease fire and reminded my wife of her own words.

"It's just a phase," I repeated back to her over and over.

Just because our son expressed curiosity about playing with girl's toys didn't necessarily put him at risk of growing into a homosexual. We lived in the late '80s, a progressive day and age in the United States. Many young boys played with Barbie dolls or EZ Bake Ovens. Most people didn't have much of a problem with it anymore.

anna

I hoped this argument would convince Becca to keep an open mind. She didn't exactly approve of me buying Andy his first dollhouse, but eventually she gave into my pleading and agreed to look the other way. Things began to cool off, and we almost became a happy family again. Until the day that Andy demanded we call him "Anna".

Frosty the Snowman had a better chance of dancing his way through hell than of getting my God-fearing wife to tolerate her son's choice to live a life of sin. Overcome by the idea of raising an "abomination", she forced an ultimatum on me. I had to choose between my son turned daughter, or her and her God. I stood by my child, and she stormed out the door. She told me she would go to live at our vacation home on the lake until I could agree to take steps to fix our "it".

It feels like forever ago. I've repressed so many memories that I struggle to picture her face anymore. I suppose I blackout the images in order to protect myself, but it does nothing to numb the pain. I still hurt like it happened yesterday. Losing Becca ripped my soul in half. Nothing had ever damaged me so. I felt like I had downed a flaming cocktail of confusion, pity, heartache and hatred. I wanted to die right then and there. If not for my precious child, I may have considered taking my own life that night; but I knew I could never do that. I had a reason to breath. The one person I cared for more than Becca now depended on me, and me alone. I had to keep fighting for the love of my life. My precious first born. My baby girl. My Anna.

She

I vowed to love my child no matter what. Before Andy's birth, Becca and I had both claimed adamantly that we did not care whether we received a boy or a girl. We would happily thank the Lord for a healthy baby of any gender. I didn't see a reason to change that mindset simply because our child had aged a few years. In the months after Becca left us, I began to see more and more of Anna. Eventually, it reached a point where I couldn't predict which version of my child would come home to see me after school. I worked late nights, so I rarely got to see my baby get on the bus. Every day at three thirty I waited by the window for it to make its stop in front of my house. On some days, the boy I'd known for years got off. On others, little Anna would come skipping down our driveway. I could tell them apart easily from their body posture and gait alone. They spoke in different voices and had entirely separate personalities and mannerisms. I never needed to ask to whom I spoke.

Andy remained the sweetest boy. Unassuming and polite. Flexible and compromising. He would gladly sacrifice his own well being for that of my own or a friend's. He would never gripe or complain about my

anna

shortcomings as a single parent, and did everything he could to help fill the vacancy left by his mother.

Anna, on the other hand, took after her mom. She required my full attention. Never would she hesitate to demand things a certain way. I did everything I could to make sure she got everything she wanted. My princess deserved that I treat her like one. Within a week she had me cutting the crust off of her school lunches. I happily made them this way, knowing that if Andy made an appearance that day, I wouldn't hear a complaint from him. As the weeks rolled by, Andy's bedroom became Anna's playhouse. The walls transitioned from bright red to a pastel pink with lacy white edges. One by one, Anna convinced me to replace his race cars and war heroes with pretty dolls and dream houses. When Andy came home, he always appeared confused as to why his living quarters had converted to girly-ville, but I never once heard him complain. As long as I made sure his prized fighter figurine waited on the bed for him each night, he would go to sleep a happy boy.

One day Anna finally decided she'd had enough of her "boy clothes", and asked if we could go shopping for something a little bit prettier. At first, I hesitated. Despite her feminine behavior, Anna still looked like a boy on the outside. I feared how the other kids at school would react if they saw her decked out in fully femme attire.

In the end, I knew I couldn't say no to my little girl. We ended up going on a full shopping spree. I ran my credit card up to the max, buying her everything from

lipstick to eyeliner to pretty red boots with a frilly little ribbon on top.

Finally, it came time to look for her dress. She searched for nearly two hours, picking through every item on the shelf, slowly narrowing down her selection until she found the perfect one. She ultimately selected a white lace top dress with a coral chiffon bottom. With a radiant smile, she slid it over her head and pulled it down around her body. For the first time, I saw my daughter in her full beauty.

She picked out a lipstick to match the coral color of her chiffon, and painted her nails in multiple shades. One hand complemented the dress, while the other matched the jet-black hair she had grown out over the months.

Her ensemble complete, she looked up at me with a beaming smile and said, “Thank you, daddy.” One of the greatest moments of my pathetic existence. She finally seemed happy. For the first time, as happy as Andy appeared on the day I bought him his boxing figurine. Once again, I had become the hero.

Unfortunately, not everyone shared my boundless love for her. As I had feared, Anna began to come home from school with bumps, bruises and bloody noses. She tried to hide them from me at first, wearing heavier makeup and long sleeved turtlenecks under her dress. I tried time and again to ask her who had done it, but over and over she refused to provide me with an answer.

“I’m not supposed to talk about that,” she would whisper to me as her eyes filled with tears.

anna

I stormed into the school administrator's office one afternoon demanding answers. I shouted to the heavens when every last staff member and teacher failed to identify a culprit. Eventually, I came to discover that they suspected me as the abuser. When Anna graduated from Kindergarten, I had her pulled out of school and transferred to a neighboring district. It helped nothing. As she got older, the evidence of abuse only worsened. I didn't care if she wanted to identify as a boy, a girl, a cat or a moose, no one deserved to suffer the torture she had to endure. But in the early 1990s, the world had little compassion for a young boy who dressed, walked and acted like a girl.

For years, I begged and pleaded with Anna to change her behavior. The more I tried to get close to her, the more frightened of me she seemed to become. I felt distant and afraid. At times, I even wished I could just have my Andy back. Things would have worked out so much simpler if I only had a normal son! I cursed myself for thinking that way, but I couldn't bear to see my daughter hurt.

It never seemed to stop her though. With each day that past, Andy slipped further and further away, and Anna grew into a resilient young lady. Despite the abuse, she refused to back down. She kept her head up and skipped along her own path. In fifth grade, she even tried out for the girls dance team. Of course, they did not welcome her into the club. After all, she still had the body of a nine-year old boy. Not exactly the pretty little picture you'd but on the front of a playbill.

She danced anyway. Anywhere she could find the time and space, she skipped and twirled and dipped and sashayed. It wasn't much to see. Not at first. She stumbled around like a drunken sailor until she became comfortable controlling her movement.

I got used to the sound of bone on wood as she practiced on the paneling in her bedroom. Bone on wood, bone on wood, bone on wood. I heard the thuds of Anna's falls echo just above my head at least a dozen times a day. She began using her clumsy dance practices as an excuse for new bumps and bruises. I could tell she continued to keep me at a distance, as if hiding some terrible secret from me.

I never did manage to find an answer. Her mysterious abuser still walked the streets. I had allowed him. He had probably gotten away scott free. Free to abuse again. He would probably only become worse as he aged. After all, he had an opportunity to grow into an adult. A privilege my daughter would never get to enjoy. I imagined what kind of sick, twisted bastard would grow out of a seed so evil it could treat my daughter with such cruelty. I didn't want to meet such a being. The same type of creep I met on the night of Anna's death. I didn't want to face that kind of demon ever again, but I knew I had to. I'd failed my Anna before. Failed to find her abuser and make them pay. I couldn't allow that to happen again. I'd never forgive myself until I watched the ghost of her killer descend to hell.

revelation

I paced back and forth staring at the diamond ring in my hand. The wood panels creaked beneath my feet as I retraced the path where my daughter used to dance. I circled around in apprehension, as if practicing the steps to the Swan Lake pageant in which she so desperately wanted to play the lead role.

I knew where to find the next clue. Without a doubt I needed to pay a visit to my cabin by the lake. I hadn't visited in years for fear of facing my ex-wife. I hadn't seen or spoken to her since the day she abandoned Anna and I. I didn't want to. From my perspective, she hurt our daughter worse than the refuse who left those bruises on her arms and around her eye. Anyone who would willfully abandon the flesh of their own loins deserves an uncomfortable seat in Hades if you ask me. I doubted my ability to look in her eyes without vomiting. The very thought of the woman I once loved more than anyone now induced the strongest of gag reflexes.

She'd left without a goodbye all those years ago, and neither of us had seen her since. The only sign of her existence came through her bloodsucking lawyers trying to leech every dime they could. Those human parasites

anna

managed to leave Anna and I in a run down duplex, while Becca slept surrounded by the luxuries of our lakefront vacation home. I only knew her whereabouts because the lawyers had worked so hard to take them from me. Yes, she had a legal right to stay there, but I couldn't bring myself to call it her home. The lakehouse had remained in my family for years, passed down to me from Anna's grandfather and his grandfather before. I had inherited it by birthright, but the court saw fit to award it to Becca, seeing as she had made the lion's share of the money to support Andy and I throughout our time together. She knew how much the place meant to me, but had no problem throwing us out in the cold anyway. I hope our daughter's ghost haunts the bitch without mercy.

As much as I dreaded confronting Becca, the diamond ring I found in the bedroom suggested that she would give me the best shot of finding and avenging my daughter's murderer. I carefully planned my trip, waiting until I knew my probation officer wouldn't come looking for me. As soon as he shut my front door behind him on the day of my escape, I went to work on removing my ankle monitor.

When living alone and confined, hours seem to stretch on for eternity. I had plenty of time to spend stretching out my aching knees and ankles. I discovered that in recent months my joints had grown inexplicably stronger and more limber. So much so that I'd developed the ability to slip in and out of my ankle monitor when I needed to. It took considerable effort, and more than a few minutes of struggle to pull off, but a situation like this one made it worth the extra pain. I pulled down on

my toes until they stood in line with my slender calves and forced the ankle strap down around my heel. I then wedged the bulky part of the device between a door and its frame. I pulled with all my might until finally my ankle and heel ripped their way through the hard plastic and metal strap. Free at last.

After I managed to free my foot, I snuck out the back door of my house and hopped a couple of fences, making my way into the backyard of my former brother-in-law. I prayed he still kept the same work schedule as he did during my time married to his sister. If so, he would not return home for another three and a half hours. Plenty of time for me to make it out of the state with his ride. Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't dream of taking another man's property, but the government had seized all means of transportation as part of my house arrest arrangements. Fortunately, I knew exactly where to find the spare keys to the '67 Chevrolet parked in his garage. After all these years, he still kept them hidden behind the same false panel in his toolbox. The fool.

I located the keys, nervously climbed behind the wheel and turned the ignition. My heart pounded. I feared the entirety of the police force would roll up behind me with lights blazing the second I entered the street. Nothing. Only the everyday sounds of my empty neighborhood filled my ears. I cautiously rolled through the quiet streets on my way to the interstate highway. It felt like returning home after a long leave of absence. Little had changed since I'd driven these roads, but I'd spent so much time locked away in my home prison that even my own small town looked unfamiliar.

anna

I carefully obeyed all posted signs and speed limits. If a bored meter maid pulled me over for even a minor infraction, they'd surely send me straight back to county lockup on violation of my probation. That would mean a death sentence for my plan of revenge. I had to take extra precautions. I crossed my fingers in hopes that my brother-in-law had kept updated tags and working headlights on his classic collector's rig. I didn't begin to relax until I merged onto the interstate and lost myself in the sea of cars.

I spent every second of the long, lonely drive trying to work out what I would say when I saw Becca for the first time in seven years. How would I possibly reason with a woman who hates me and my daughter? I had no reason to believe she wouldn't just slam the door in my face and immediately call the police. For hours I scrambled through ideas in my head, each one more hopelessly desperate than the last. I cursed myself for my own stupidity. What kind of a fool drives this distance to throw himself at the feet of his embattled ex-wife and honestly hopes for good results? The kind of fool without another option.

I'd tried everything I could think of to gain insight into Anna's case. I'd come up with nothing but fistfuls of dead ends. Becca's diamond ring represented my only hope of finding an answer. I had to try and reason with her. I know she hated Anna for the girl she had become, but at one point we all loved each other. I prayed I could speak to the Becca who I married, the Becca I adored. Maybe somewhere deep inside, that kind-hearted mother still existed. Maybe somehow I could break through to her and get some answers. I had to try.

I no longer had the option of turning back anyway. I'd been on the road for twenty-three hours. My brother-in-law had certainly noticed his prized Chevrolet had left the garage by now. He'd surely have alerted the authorities. I wouldn't expect him to blame anyone but me for its disappearance, so I had little doubt my parole officer and every other state official knew I had violated the terms of my house arrest. I had nowhere to go except Becca's front door.

Exhausted from my drive, I pulled up to the cabin where Becca and I had shared so many wonderful memories. I climbed out of the vehicle and felt my boots sink into the soft mud. I took a deep breath and inhaled the scent of the forest. My heart ached at the memories that came pouring back into my brain. Memories I'd long since blotted out. I instantly recalled the softness of her cheeks against mine. The warmth of her voice. The love we'd made on the front porch, not a neighbor within miles to stop us.

I stood for a minute. Shaking. Overwhelmed.

If just a scent could so affect me, I feared what might happen when I knocked on our door. Entered our home. Saw her face. I gathered my nerves and tried to push my feelings and memories back down into the box in my gut where I had stored them for all these years. I swallowed hard and forced myself to move forward.

I rapped gently on the door frame, and the sound echoed through the cabin, bouncing around the room where I'd asked Becca to marry me. The words "I do" sounded in my ears once again from the voice I hadn't heard in years. I held my breath and waited for the door

anna

to open. I braced myself for the impact of laying eyes upon my former bride.

One Mississippi.

Two Mississippi.

I counted in my head.

Three Mississippi.

Four.

Nothing. Not a creature stirring.

I knocked again. I held my breath. I waited. I counted.

Silence. Her voice in my head quieted, leaving me alone with only the sounds of the forest.

Nobody home.

I breathed a sigh of momentary relief. I would at least have some time to catch my breath before facing my ex-wife. I sat myself down on the porchfront rocking chair and took in the scenery around me. Blue skies and birds chirping. The scent of mud and pine trees. Sounds of a distant river rushing in the background. The creak of my chair rocking back and forth on our hand-assembled veranda. My keychain jangled in my pocket as I swayed back and forth to the song of the chickadee.

My keys! Why hadn't I thought of that? I never bothered to turn over the key to the cabin after Becca won the dwelling in court. Perhaps she just forgot to ask for it, with so many other legal worries to tend to. With

Becca gone, perhaps I would have time to snoop around the place uninhibited in search for clues. What a blessing! I anxiously pulled out my keychain and fumbled for the cabin key. I prayed that she hadn't changed the locks as I slid the teeth into the doorknob and turned.

The door opened and a stream of light flooded into the empty cabin. I expected to see heart wrenching evidences of Becca's new life. I feared for the worst. What if she had met someone new? What if they looked happy? What if she had another child? Fortunately, I didn't have to face those questions. The place looked as though no one had occupied it in years. Dust covered the windowsills and fireplace mantle. The furniture remained arranged just the way I remembered it. The dirty windows hardly let in enough light for a proper investigation. I flicked a light switch. No power.

I made my way into the kitchen. I could almost smell the aroma of Becca's cooking, drifting off the stovetop. Thoughts of her legendary stuffed turkey and creamed mushroom sauce filled my brain as I rummaged through the pantry. I pulled out two long stemmed candles and a box of matches. I lit them and carried them like a torch as I climbed the stairs towards our bedroom.

We'd lined the stairs to our master suite with photographs of our happy family. All the places we'd visited in our years together violently forced their way out of repression. The three of us hugging the General Sherman tree in Sequoia National Park, our trip to Disneyland for Andy's third birthday, the giant snowman

anna

we built back behind the cabin. In every image, we wore jubilant smiles.

But no eyes.

Someone had scratched the eyes out of our faces in every last image. The sight disturbed me so much that I stepped back and nearly fell over the banister. What would cause her to do such a thing? Why not just throw the pictures out or burn them? I understood that she couldn't stand the sight of Anna and I, but why would she tear the eyes out of her own images? I struggled to regain my footing. I didn't want to continue. The returning memories haunted me. The sinister imagery made me weak in the knees. Every instinct told me to turn around, sprint out of the house, drive with the gas pedal on the floor to the nearest police station, and turn myself in. It would have served me better.

Instead, I managed to regain my footing and continue my climb to the bedroom. Terrified and hyperventilating, I paused in front of the bedroom door. I hesitated, once again with my hand above the knob. My fears blanketed me like a heavy comforter soaked in ice cold glacier runoff. I almost couldn't bring myself to reach out and turn the handle, but I'd come too far to stop now. I knew I sat on the verge of clearing my name and solving the mystery of Anna's murder. I could feel it in my gut. I swallowed hard and squeezed my eyes tightly shut as I twisted the door open.

I didn't think I had anything to lose. If you'd have suggested anything could ever hurt me again after the agony of losing my wife and daughter, I'd have called you a damn fool. Death would have made for a welcome

40

relief, but nothing could have prepared me for what I saw on the other side of that door.

There, staring at me from across the bedroom stood my daughter's killer. I stood petrified, staring once again into the eyes of the devil. The same all-penetrating, soul destroying eyes that I'd watched destroy my world all those years ago. The eyes of my ex-wife, Becca.

me

I stared into her eyes and screamed as they stared back at me. I dropped to my knees in horror as the realization flooded back into my conscious. She shared my presence on the night that Anna died. I stared into her eyes as she took my daughter's life. She looked back at me and into my soul. I sat, emptying my lungs at her until I had not a breath left in them. I raised my hand to the back of my head and pulled on my hair, trying to distract myself from my emotional languish. I felt dizzy and sick. The room twirled around me, like it must have for my daughter on all those long days spent practicing her dance. I wanted to fall and hit the floor. I could practically hear the sound of Anna striking the ground, bone on wood, but I remained upright.

I forced myself to confront my adversary. To stare her in the eyes and have my revenge. I fought my way to my feet, the weight of my torment pressing down on my shoulders. I rose in spite of it and carried myself across the room. I raised my hand and balled up a fist. I cocked my arm back and lunged towards those horrible burning eyes. With the vengeance of a thousand souls I swung, delivering a blow directly between them.

anna

Pain shot up my wrist and sliced through my hand. On impact, I realized that I had struck not another human being, but a tall dressing mirror. The same style of mirror that sat in Anna's bedroom. I looked down at my crumpled hand. Blood covered my long fingers and brightly colored nails. Shards of shattered glass stuck out of the flesh between my knuckles. I glanced up to see not Becca, but my own reflection standing in front of me, split down the middle by a long jagged crack in the glass. For the first time in years, I forced myself look directly into the mirror. I did not recognize the man staring back at me. Only the devil returned my gaze.

It turns out, I knew him all along. The one person I never suspected. Me.

I yelled, helpless to accept reality. Instead, I turned and ran. I nearly fell over my own feet as I retreated down the stairs and bolted out the back door.

I ran and ran. Into the forest in no particular direction. I sprinted as fast as my aching legs could carry me. My joints stressed as my feet slammed frivolously into the forest floor. No matter how fast I ran, I could never escape what followed me. When I finally stopped running, I stood and stared at a pile of bones still assembled in the shape of a human female. Becca.

The memories filled my head until its breaking point. A pain so vivid I thought it might burst. I recalled dragging Becca's beaten body through the woods and leaving her here to die so many years ago. It all came back so clearly. I never forgave her for the way she treated my Anna. I held onto that grudge for years. I had tried to visit her cabin many times, only to have her reject

my pleas for reconciliation again and again. One horrible night, overtaken with rage and weakness, I bludgeoned her senseless and drug her out to the woods. I left her there, bleeding and broken to fend for herself. The same way she left her family.

Or so I thought.

In truth, I carried her with me. Her spirit. Her aura. All of her joy and bitterness and love and hatred. I had taken a vow that linked me to her forever. Even in death I could not escape. Unknowingly, I kept her with me that night. I brought my daughter's abuser back into our home. It explained the bruises and the bloody noses. Finally, I understood why Anna always appeared confused and apprehensive when greeting me upon returning home. Like me, she didn't know who would join her at the end of the day. The schoolyard bullies never existed. Anna simply refused to explain where her injuries came from, because she couldn't rat on Mommy without giving up Daddy. She kept things from me, because I never would have believed them.

I never found out until far too late. Until the night I watched myself strangle my own daughter. Of course, I didn't commit that horrible crime, but I allowed Becca to take control. I sat in a distant corner of my consciousness while she used my body to destroy everything I cared for. Isn't that just as bad?

In the eyes of the law, I am forgiven. The lawyers in their fancy clothes will sit in court and argue that I'd gone insane. I knew not what I did. They'll say that I suffer from schizophrenia or some obscure variation of dissociative disorder. It runs in the family.

anna

They may have it right, but does it even matter? I'll avoid the death penalty, but that won't bring my daughter back to life. If I continue to live, I'll have to do it knowing that my own hands choked Anna's neck until she went limp and cold. I won't have the luxury of repressing that memory again.

I did it. I allowed Becca to take my precious daughter out of this world. Away from all she knew. Away from me.

Then again, did she really take her from me at all? I surveyed the forest that surrounded me. A collection of dolls, plush toys and girly trinkets lay scattered all around. Beaten, battered and broken, they littered the forest floor. I could see grooves and patterns carved into the ground beneath me, as if worn in by a pair of size twelve dancing feet, practicing for hours on end. Anna's dancing feet. No wonder my joints ache in the morning and I always smell like glitter.

I glanced down at the blood seeping beneath the cracks in my brilliantly polished nails. Anna always kept them pretty and pristine. She won't appreciate the fissures I had caused. I fought the urge to fix them up before she noticed.

I knew what I needed to do. A clearer moral choice has never existed. A reasonable, righteous man would turn himself in to the authorities. He'd let them lock him up and throw away the key. I should do that, but I know all too well what comes next.

They'll drug me up and put me on the straight and narrow. Dopamine blockers and long, heartfelt chats will

have me back to normal in no time at all. I'm sure with the right treatment, I could get my life back. I could get my act together and become a contributing member of society. A real upstanding citizen. Without a doubt, that's what I should do, but I've come so far on my own.

I've finally found my family again. The three have become one flesh. We might never get to live life like we used to. I might never again get to kiss my wife or hold my daughter, but if I fix myself I might realize they've ceased to exist. I can't have that. It simply will not do.

So we'll stay here, the three of us, hidden away in the depths of the forest. Me, my wife and Anna, dancing from dusk til daybreak.

No, not quite the life I always pictured we would have. We will never return to the way things were before. We might never even have a chance at happiness again, but at least this way... *we'll always be together.*

About the Author

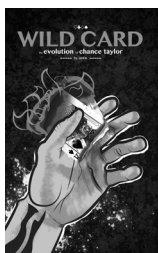


ianBK grew up on comic books and cartoons. He secretly hoped that one day he might stumble across the path of a radioactive spider who would bestow upon him supernatural abilities. That hasn't happened yet, so ian has turned to writing - a craft that gives him the ability to create universes and inspire the imaginations of others. *Anna* is his second self-published book, and first in the horror genre. The inspiration for the short story came when ian worked as a haunter at Hobb's Grove Halloween Haunt in Sanger, California.

You can follow him on Twitter @ioliver8 for updates and general tomfoolery.

Visit ianbk.com for more info.

Other works by ianBK



Wild Card

The Evolution of Chance Taylor

The walls of Chance Taylor's apartment are plastered with pictures of his idol, Valencio Ruiz. Chance has always wanted to save the world. Since he was a little boy he fantasized about growing up and following in Valencio's footsteps, but the cards haven't exactly fallen his way. Until now...

When his daily lunch time poker game goes bad, Chance's life gets an unexpected reshuffle. His post-game meltdown causes fireworks that catch the attention of a legendary scientist who claims to have unlocked the secret to accelerating human evolution. Can Chance overcome his blame-throwing attitude and evolve into a hero, or will he take his place on top of the world only to realize the true cost of getting what he wants?

Find out, in the pages of *Wild Card: The Evolution of Chance Taylor*, the first novel by ianBK.