

Mike's Fiction©



Best Intentions©

At 7pm Tuesday the phone rang, sending a shard of ice through Anna. Her eyes darted around the office, took in the green walls, the gray linoleum floor and battered metal desks—and, finally, Lauren by the water cooler. She nodded, confirming that Anna was assigned the first call.

Taking a breath, she picked up the phone. “Good evening, this is the In-Touch Hotline of the Chicago Counseling Center. How may I help you?”

There was silence at the other end. It was not uncommon for callers to experience difficulty starting.

“We’re here to help in any way we can. Take your time.”

“I—I have a problem.”

A male voice, raspy; likely the result of stress, Anna thought.

“If you’ll tell me about it, I’m sure I can help.”

The caller whispered. “I hope so. Because—I did something. Something terrible.” His voice grew louder, insistent. “But it wasn’t on purpose. It was an accident.”

Anna encouraged him. “Accidents can definitely happen.”

“And, well, I think I only have one choice.” He took a breath. “I have to kill myself.”

She stiffened. He did not sound like a crank caller.

* * *

Late for work, Anna ran from her car to the gravesites. On the first Tuesday of each month, she made it a practice to visit her mother and father, who lay side by side in St. Boniface Cemetery. This morning, she'd overslept and barely got her daughter, Becky, to second grade on time. As she caught her breath, she twisted her mother's wedding ring on her left hand then bent down and placed a single red rose on each headstone. Stepping back, she turned to face her mother's grave and stood perfectly still.

In a moment, the woman's image became clear in her mind, knitting in a chair in their living room, with the aroma of apple pie in the oven teasing the air.

A little girl stood by her mother's side. "Mama, tell me again how you met Daddy."

Her mother had told the story countless times, but put down her knitting.

"Well, sweetheart, I first saw Daddy at our church social. He asked me to dance and I was scared to death. Know why?"

Anna knew why, but shook her head as she climbed on her mother's lap.

"Because he was the tallest, most handsome man I ever saw—and he had the friendliest smile." Her mother's eyes twinkled. "He was a doctor, you know. And he lived to help people. Everybody knew him...and he always insisted they call him by his first name—never Doctor."

Her mother cupped Anna's chin in her hand, gently guiding her eyes to her own. "And, young lady, you are the spitting image of him. Right down to that big, beautiful smile."

Of course, that made Anna smile.

Those were the best of days. Anna's father had died in a work related accident when she was only two. With the loss of income, her mother had to scrimp and save so that Anna could go to the best schools, then college and med school.

Anna was very pleased her mother was able to be a grandmother to Becky, if only for a few short years.

"Mama...you deserve much more," she said to her grave.

* * *

The office of the In-Touch Hotline was an airless room in a run down building on Chicago's south side. Anna's post was a gray metal desk, the kind found in police stations. One Tuesday night a week was her commitment as a volunteer psychiatrist. She had just arrived for her shift, which began at 6:30pm.

Lauren was her partner tonight and sat at a desk across the room. They provided backup for each other and at least two calls could be handled at once, and more by patching in supervisors. If a caller was about to do something rash, Anna could signal her partner to start a trace and dispatch police.

“It scares me to death, but I love the work,” she confided to a friend one day. “The results are immediate...tangible. I’ve already talked two potential suicides down. Can you believe it...me?”

The rush following the intense dialogue of a call was so exhilarating she could never get to sleep those nights. She often prayed she wouldn’t fail.

Anna saw Lauren struggling with a ball of yarn. “What’s that you’re knitting?”

“A muffler for Josh. But it seems kind of—narrow.”

Lauren held it up and Anna saw her point. “Well, maybe he can use it as a necktie.”

“Very funny.” Lauren, said, smiling and returning to her stitching.

Josh and Lauren had just married and were obviously in love. That was how Anna's marriage began. Med school was behind her by the time impetuous youth drove Alan and her to the altar. She became a psychiatrist rather than a G.P., which her father had been, because plumbing the depths of people was her passion.

Motherhood hadn’t stopped her obtaining both her PhD and a degree in clinical psychiatry. She secured a staff position in the Psychotherapy Program at a University of Chicago hospital in Hyde Park and in three years was promoted to Associate Director. Alan, an attorney, tried and failed three times to pass the Illinois Bar.

At the time, she believed Alan possessed great potential, that they would grow together. But, they didn’t.

Anna shivered as she remembered a particularly bitter exchange.

“Well...hello Ms. I-had-to-work-late-again.”

“I’m sorry...really sorry, Alan.” She locked the door of their apartment, then headed to the couch to give him a peck on the cheek.

“A patient of mine was admitted to Cook County hospital at six. They called, said he was suicidal. I had to go.”

Alan waved a hand. “No problemo. Of course, I had nothing nearly as dramatic to do. Just a few hundred pages of court transcripts to summarize for the

hotshots by tomorrow.” Alan folded his arms, avoided eye contact. “I put Becky down for the night. She asked why you weren’t here. I told her you had more important things to do.”

Anna adopted a policy of ignoring the chiding. She recognized it as a textbook case of acting out feelings of inadequacy. His behavior would stop with a few victories of his own.

But there were not victories. And things got worse.

“You’ve done it again, haven’t you?” Alan came up behind her as she prepared a late dinner at the stove. He just finished an inspection of the table.

Anna’s shoulders slumped but she didn’t turn or speak.

“You put the knife on the wrong side of the plate.” He put his hands on his hips and sniffed. “That isn’t chicken again, is it?”

Anna felt the pressure build—more than usual—but focused on stirring.

He picked up a can on the counter, then moved within inches of Anna’s ear. He spoke too loudly. “And canned peaches for dessert again?”

Something flashed behind Anna’s eyes. She reached for the can and spun around, caught her petulant husband square on the cheek.

The violence of the episode shook Anna, even though Alan only suffered a bad bruise. It wasn’t the first time she had lost control of herself. As a child she had snapped, suddenly hit her cousin with a favorite doll when he had tried to grab it; she broke his nose

The peach episode, as she had later labeled it, undermined what little was left of their marriage. The divorce was finalized three years ago.

Since then Anna made a few half-hearted attempts to date, and only because a friend had badgered her. Oh, she knew she was attractive – glossy chestnut hair, clear skin, tall but not too tall. And she knew she was warm, loving, could be witty when she needed to be. No, it was none of that. It was her success. She knew it intimidated men. And she didn’t want to live through that again. Besides, caring for Becky and her career were rewarding enough.

She wondered, though, if these were just excuses. Perhaps she was afraid, because deep inside there might be something terribly wrong.

* * *

Anna's grip on the telephone tightened. The gravity of the conversation propelled Anna from her reverie to the here-and-now at warp speed. She covered the mouthpiece of the phone with her hand as her mind raced.

She knew she couldn't ask the caller what he had done, because that might make him feel judged. So, she would probe the periphery until she established a rapport.

"Can you tell me why you believe suicide is your only option?" She was careful to keep her voice steady and professional.

"Yes, yes. I want to," the man replied. "That's why I called. I have to make sure."

Anna smiled. He was receptive. A good time to get his name.

"By the way, my name's Anna. What can I call you?"

"Oh, sure. Billy. That's my name, Billy."

Anna pictured him as thin and boyish, maybe in his twenties, with reddish-blond hair and a cowlick. Her instincts told her that he was basically a good person.

"Billy. That name sounds like it fits you, someone intelligent, friendly, good intentioned." Build his self-esteem.

A sigh. "I don't think so. Can I tell you about my problem now?"

Anna's face reddened. "Yes...please. Go ahead, Billy."

"I—I'm not sure where to begin. Maybe yesterday, when the voices started."

Anna expected him to continue, but he just stopped. "How many voices were there, Billy?"

"Oh, two. There were two. And they kept repeating." He swallowed. "The first one told me I had to atone for my sin. It said that telling the police wouldn't help, that I had to do good works, more than *they* could have done in their lifetimes. The voice said that would balance the scales."

"That voice seems to make sense, Billy." Anna wanted to reinforce what sounded like safe, solid advice.

"But the second voice—" Billy moaned. "It was louder, much louder. It laughed at me. Said I couldn't sentence myself. It mocked me." He choked back a sob. "I have

no discipline, it said. I lack goodness. I—I couldn't even make a down payment on sainthood. And that's what it told me I'd have to become to atone—a saint."

Anna couldn't decide yet whether he was delusional, but she spotted an opening. "Billy. You know, it seems to me the idea of doing good works has lots of merit. What I mean is, if you can't be a saint—and who could—then doing the best you can is just fine." Anna crossed her fingers.

"But the second voice is right. I'm not a good person. I'm really not."

"Well, I don't think you have to be all that good. You just have to try, do your best, Billy. That would be good enough. I'm sure of it."

His voice exploded with agitation. "But you don't know what I did. It—it was terrible." He breathed fast. "My life is ruined. It's over."

Somehow, Anna calmed Billy down, got him to tell her he had worked for Price Waterhouse-Coopers, that he had been doing well and met a beautiful girl with hair so blond it was almost white. Jill was her name and they would have married.

"Everything came apart after *it* happened. It all just crumbled." Billy's voice sounded detached, like he was describing someone else. "Stopped going to work, couldn't get out of bed. Didn't answer the phone, the door. Someone kept calling and calling, wouldn't stop. Then a letter—by the door. It had tear stains, from Jill." Billy began to sob, gasped words in between. "She said she couldn't love someone who wouldn't love back."

It sounded to Anna like Billy suffered from Acute Distress Disorder that had progressed to full-blown Depression. She knew she had to turn the dialogue around, back to an analysis of the right course of action.

"Do you believe in God, Billy?"

"Yes—no," he snapped. "And I know what you're going to say. That God will forgive me. But he won't. He can't. Doing my best is not good enough—not even close."

"Billy. You know, there are medicines that can help."

The information was met with a cold silence. Anna felt frustrated. She was painted into a corner with only one way to proceed: find out what Billy had done. She hoped she could find a point of leverage to talk him down.

Her grip on the telephone tightened. "Would you like to tell me what happened, Billy? Everything is strictly between us, you know. No tape recording. Just you and me."

"Yes, Anna. Yes. That's exactly what I need—to confess to someone."

It was a good sign that he used her name; she sensed she might be back on track. She saw Lauren approach, a question on her face. Anna signaled with a nod that everything was still OK.

She spoke softly. “I’m listening, Billy.”

“I was drinking. I don’t really do it much. I didn’t pay attention, I guess, to the road, I mean. I was driving, going home. It was maybe eleven, or midnight.” He stopped.

“Yes, Billy.”

“And, well, she ran. Right in front of me—came out of nowhere.” He swallowed hard. “And I turned the wheel hard, to my right, I think.” His voice grew louder. “And the car—the car started to slide. And I think— No, I *know*. I hit her with the side of the car. It skidded. I could see her face—the woman’s”

Anna froze. She twisted the wedding ring back and forth, lost in a tangle of thoughts. Was it possible? Could he be the one? A line from Casablanca popped into her mind, the one that starts, “Of all the gin joints in the world—”

“Anna, are you still there?”

She pulled herself together and managed to speak. “Yes. Yes. Please go on.”

“Ok. Well, I know I should have stopped. Should have called an ambulance, the police—somebody.” Billy sobbed, took quick breaths between words. “Oh God. I wish I did, Anna. But I didn’t. I just drove on, told myself it was a dream, some kind of drunken hallucination. I mean the car drove fine and all.”

Billy told Anna that he woke the next morning hung over, ran out to his car, saw the driver’s side door bashed in. He hurried to a store, bought the Tribune, read the brief account of how she had been walking home after dinner and a movie at a neighbor’s. He knew it was no dream, that he had murdered her. He told Anna how he panicked, paid to park his car in a garage nearby. Had it repaired later.

Anna sat perfectly still, felt that if she moved an inch, the evil thing lurking just beyond her senses would detect her, flood her with a torrent of hatred, make her fail. But she had to be sure.

“Billy? How long ago?”

“Last January. January 11th.”

Anna squeezed her eyes shut. She couldn’t bring herself to ask the victim’s name. “Where—where did it happen?”

“South of North Avenue. I live in Wicker Park.”

Anna swallowed her breath, couldn't let it out. She felt the cold rush of memories of the hit and run last January 11th, images that she buried with her mother: the starkness of the cold metal gurney, the viscous brown blood that matted her hair, her mouth agape, the teeth broken and bloody.

“Anna? Are you OK?”

Rage began to well inside her like lava propelled by superheated steam. She had hated this person for almost a year. She hated what he had done to her. Now she knew his name.

She could only disguise part of it in her voice. “Yes, yes I'm here.”

“See.? I told you it was a terrible thing. I knew you'd be mad at me.”

Anna couldn't respond. Her training alone guided her to the only sane course of action.

“Billy—uh—I'm not feeling so good. Something's made me sick. Would it be all right? I mean, if someone else—Lauren—talks to you?”

He was silent for what seemed a lifetime to Anna, and during that time her rage built again, grew tall as thunderheads towering over the mountains.

When Billy spoke, his voice was steady, oddly authoritative. “You're not playing fair, Anna. I want to talk to you. I *have* to talk to you.”

“Billy, you don't understand. I can't. I just can't.” Anna was shocked, angry that he had her pleading.

“I have a gun. It's right here—by my hand.”

“A gun?” She stiffened. *Is he taunting me?*

“And if I use it, it'll be your fault, Anna.”

He sounded petulant, like a spoiled little boy who wanted to take her doll. Her mind whirled, became darker and darker.

A brilliant flash exploded behind her eyes. Like an immense force had ripped through a dam deep inside, released a sinuous primordial beast, a creature that shook its massive head and roared. It wasn't a nameless, faceless person that had run down her mother. It was Billy—Billy all along. All that talk about his girlfriend, Jill, and his conscience. Pure crap. He was evil. Pure evil.

Anna leaned over the desk and spoke rapidly. “You know, Billy, you're right. That was a terrible thing. And I shouldn't tell you this, we're not supposed to, but seeing it's you, Billy, I'll break the rules.”

She took a breath, leaned over further. “That voice you heard was right on the mark—the one that told you that you’d never be able to do anything good enough to balance the scales, because you just don’t have it in you, do you Billy?”

Anna didn’t wait for a response, continued to spit out the words.

“And I know you’re afraid of the police. I mean, I would be too. Think of what they’ll do in lockup—what they do to mother killers.

“Anna—” he sobbed.

“Hell, and that’s not even real jail, Billy. In prison you’ll have to entertain the queers in the shower, and then finally, a shiv under your ribs—if you’re lucky that is. And what will they say in the papers? On television? Shit, Billy, you’ll be hated, reviled, a goddamn Satan.”

Anna paused, clenched her teeth. She wanted him to grovel, fight back. But there was no response. She became aware of Lauren staring from her desk and lowered her voice.

“Yeah, Billy, that voice is right on the mark. Blowing your brains out is the smart way to go. But you know what, Billy?”

Still no response.

“It takes guts to kill yourself. But you don’t need any to murder, then run away. And that means, Billy, you don’t have the guts to kill yourself.” She took a breath and continued. “They spilled out of you—your guts, I mean—what little you had. Didn’t they Billy? All over the street, where the dogs, the rats, slobbered over them. Right Billy?”

She heard sniffing.

“You don’t know. You can’t know how terrible it’s been.”

Anna’s head throbbed between an icy vice that squeezed tighter and tighter.

“Is the gun loaded, Billy?”

“Yes,” he croaked.

Anna’s eyes gleamed. “Then all you have to do is pick it up.” She pictured him slobber over a large caliber weapon, maybe a ’45.

“It’s not that difficult, Billy. I was only giving you a hard time about having no guts. I like you. I wanna see you do the right thing. You’ve got guts—plenty of guts—more than enough to pick up the gun, stick the barrel in your mouth. Then, all you have to do is squeeze the trigger.”

Anna shut her eyes, made her voice more seductive. “It’ll be over in a split second, Billy. No cops, no sexual abuse, no reporters, no hate.”

She heard more sobs, then a sharp metallic click.

A barely audible whisper. “Anna?”

“They say you don’t feel a thing, Billy.”

“Will you stay? Will you stay with me?”

Anna grinned. “Yes.” She wiped spittle from her lips with the back of her hand. “I’m here Billy. Right next to you.”

A pause. Then a tiny voice, like a child’s. “Thank you.”

There was only the sound of breathing for what seemed like a long time to Anna, time to allow the implications of what she had done to seep into her mind, causing it to begin to search for something to say to reverse course, salvage what could be salvaged.

The explosion reverberated in crescendos, cascaded down her spine like a flash flood in a canyon. It pinned her back in her chair, forced her to remain rigid until the shock waves dissipated.

Finally, Anna shuddered. She removed her headset, laid it carefully on her desk. Her watch read 7:35. Her shift would end early.

The End