

LIFE FORCE PRESERVE



**Anna and the resurgent
of the precious blood**

Series by Courtney Leigh Pahlke

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CHAPTER 1

On Wednesday I stepped outside to grab my mail, and a bird pooped on my head. I managed to scare the crap out of a loitering rooftop pigeon. If I had a beak and feathers, I would fly south for the winter. I'd mingle with an outbound V—maybe join a bird posse in the Keys for a couple months while I contemplate the advantages of an early-bird retirement. I'd never lurk around on a rooftop during a snowstorm. I wasn't aware of the sneaky bird bomb until I was in front of a mirror, washing my hands. The smeary white patch caught my eye. It looked like a bleach stain in my auburn mane. Gross.

What are the odds of that happening twice in one week? Should I find my hat just in case? No, I'll spill my coffee. Forget the head armor. I feel a yawn coming and choke it down. Nah, it won't happen again—forget about the stinky bird.

I raise my smoldering mug of fresh brew up to my face and let the steam seep through my pores. The gentle mist soothes my dry skin. I close my eyes and inhale the traces of rich caramel and roasted hazelnut that exude from the foamy creamer. Just another minute until I sample this bold columbian brew.

The wood floors creak as I step toward the front door. Each footstep sounds like an old man rocking in a homemade chair. I can't help it; I stomp when I walk. Patches from the fuzzy morning light nudge through the blinds of the surrounding windows. I reach for the mail key, slide it in my pocket, and press my forehead against the front-door window.

The winter air tickles my face as it bleeds through the defective cracks of the old wooden door. I stare out the window. There're two lopsided circles of fog lingering on the glass from my nostrils. It's another frostbite-friendly morning here in the Windy City.

Inching away from the glass, I lift my coffee to my nose and smell the aroma once more. My sense of smell wants to selfishly strip the reigns from other sensory leaders. Go ahead, smell the potent coffee. I feel my salivary glands tap-dancing. The marks on the window from my breath vanish in the glass, revealing the clear reality of a gloomy morning. Naked trees aligning the sidewalk enhance the depressing still-shot picture through my window.

I stare across the street at the neighbor's front yard. Someone chopped the head off the neighbor kid's snowman. The head is smashed on the ground next to its beheaded trunk. Both eyeballs were removed and replaced as "snowman boobs" before the decapitation.

Without looking down, I stick my tongue into the coffee. Crap. Still hot. The frigid air will turn it down a notch. Making sure I have my phone, I grab the mail key and step outside. Grasping my coffee tight, I lunge out to the top of the stairs. My body jolts and shifts off balance. My stomach drops as I snap backward. I land on my back. Everything's going. Everything—gone.

CHAPTER 2

*“I see a snowman, he lost his head,
Snowman, coffee, now he’s dead.
A scorched tongue and a whack on the ground,
Anna sleeps while evil surrounds.”*

There’s an echo. Noisy traffic ricochets between skyscrapers, polluting the city. I sit up and open my eyes. Wait. I can’t see anything. Where the hell am I? The echo transforms into a piercing elongated pitch and stops. I gulp down air. I think I hear my heart hammering around in my chest. I thought it’s only possible to hear a heart with a stethoscope. The sound is faint, but it grows louder as the drum in my head magnifies. Am I sleeping?

I rub my eyes, and I’m able to see again, though things look off. Everything surrounding me is monochrome and pixelated, and I’m lying inside of a bubble. I’m in a bubble? It looks like I’m trapped inside a Halloween-themed snow globe.

A figure lurks past me. I sit up and watch. Is it a man or a woman? I can’t see clear. The mysterious blur scampers across the street into the neighbor’s yard. It bends over and gathers snow. Snow globe snow. Perfect packing snow.

*“Breathe a breath and hold it tight,
Don’t lose your mind, you know you’re right.
Wake up, Anna.”*

The wind whistles. A dead tree branch snaps and hits the ground. The stranger halts like a deer hesitating in an open field. Don’t move. Don’t breathe. Don’t let it catch me staring. It’s trapped with me inside the snow globe.

The figure moves. It lowers itself and grabs a chunk of snow. The two arms resemble tree branches. Tree branches? Odd. It packs the snow tight with its freaky arms until the snow looks the size of a soccer ball. It stretches its arms upward, raising the snowy sphere in the air.

Wait a minute? I squint. The sun beams down on the figure. It's a snowman. The neighbor's beheaded snowman. The snowman takes the ball and props it on its body. Did he just build himself a new head?

The figure spins in my direction and removes two lumps of coal from his chest. He wedges the coal against his head, creating eyeballs. The snowman whips around and stops so that he's facing me. I'm spotted.

My clothes are drenched in sweat, and I'm sunburnt. Wait—I'm outside in the snow, and snowmen can't move. Snowmen don't move. He takes a few steps toward me and stops. What's he looking at? This can't be real. Go away. I count the seconds. *One. Two. Three.* I breathe and blink. *Four. Five.* I better get up—something's not right. *Six.* The snowman turns and stares off. I feel wind. *Seven.* The wind blows, causing an icicle to shatter on the ground next to me. *Eight.* Get up, Anna. The sun vanishes behind a cloud. *Nine.* The snowman swivels around, facing my direction, and initiates a full sprint. He has legs? Stop it. I can't move. I'm stuck.

*“Anna Lynn Gibson, it's time to wake,
He's coming to get you, it's no mistake.
Hear the wind coil, feel the winter attack,
Snap out of this now, before there's no going back.”*

I gasp for air and flutter my eyelids. My mind feels mushy. Everything looks backward and duplicated as though I'm crossing my eyes while sitting in a circle of mirrors. Wind hurls at my face. I try to open my eyes, but I'm tired. I must sleep now. Now? Sleeping? Yes, sleep.

Anna, stop. Do not sleep. Dream a nightmare. What does that even mean? Stay awhile. Stop the spinning. Please stop the spinning. I'm in a pitch-black room, but I feel myself spinning. Spinning in left circles. I can't turn right. You're dreaming; get out. *Wake up.* I'm awake. The voices stop.

I open my eyes. I'm on the ground. What's wrong with me? What the hell just happened?

CHAPTER 3

A gust of nostril-piercing air burns the skin inside my nose as I inhale a stinging batch of bitterness. I'm on my back, and I'm not in the warmth of my bed. A second blast of wind catches my hair and whips it across my face. I pucker my lips and blow a strand of hair from my eyes. I feel the cold initializing a raid on my corneas.

Racket from an earsplitting sound of crunching metal makes me jolt on the ground. I lift my head and look around. The back of my skull feels like it's on fire. I lower my head and hear pulverizing sounds of melded steel prying apart. *What was that?* That's an accident. I know that sound—too familiar of a sound.

Sit up. *Sit up now.* I can't. *Has it happened again?* No—it can't be. Am I still in the snowman nightmare? I had a snowman nightmare, right?

I feel tears building along the rims of my eye sockets. I've lost control of my eyes like a river dam blasting open. I thought I had to be in hell to feel like I've been camping in Antarctica while rodents chomped away at my limbs.

Stop it. Calm down. Just do something—anything. I move my leg. A fiery prickle radiates up my calf muscle as though I'm being negatively charged by an electrical socket. I stop and listen to the noise. The surround sound shifts from crumpled metal to burning rubber. A second sound of shrieking brakes follow. The car accident is live and continues while I lay here helpless.

I move an arm and feel glass chards and cactus needles grinding around in my shoulder blades. What now? What do I do? The noise stops. I lay still and listen. I hear nothing but the wind.

The abrupt silence is off-putting. I close my eyes and wait. The wind hisses in my ears, driving chills up my spinal cord. I'm reliving my hell. What are the odds? A second car accident? I've barely been inside a vehicle since the first accident. Wait. Is this the first accident?

My heart beats faster. It's as though I'm watching myself walk across a melting ice pond, the ice crackling with every step as I try to stay ahead of the breaking ice, knowing the outcome. I'm beginning to believe that it's possible for a person to be struck by lightning multiple times.

I squeeze my eyelids open and close, blinking away the winter dryness. I roll my eyes in circles and look up and down. I suck in air and hold my breath. I close my eyes. Calm. Gentle. Warmth. Think of comfort. I exhale. A long bubble bath while enjoying a crisp glass of wine. Warm slippers. Ordering takeout and binge-watching a new series. I must power down my mind and start over. Positive headspace—don't be a head case.

I force my head upward, lifting my shoulder blades off the ground. My vision is blurred in one eye. I force the bad eye shut and stare at a brass hanging lantern. It's my brass hanging lantern. I'm laying underneath the second-floor balcony of my three-flat. I recognize the brown discoloration in the ceiling from an old bee's nest.

I tilt my head to one side and stop. I'm at the edge of my staircase. Had I tipped a few inches, I would've tumbled down an entire cement staircase. I pivot away from the edge and flip on to my side. *Think, Anna, before the cold attacks your core.* The wind pries through my pant fibers, forcing goose bumps. The ache distributes down my spine, surging with intensity.

Life feels real. Staying alive feels real. An adrenaline junkie would thrive in this moment. The whack to my head must be preventing my brain from activating an acute stress response. I'm too frail to fight. I reach an arm up in the air and move it in a circle. I feel like a geriatric patient doing water therapy.

Sucking in air, I jerk my weight on my right forearm. "Son of a baseball," I cry. Son of a baseball? What the hell was that about? It's not even baseball season. My clothing peels from the ground as I stretch myself higher. I slap my right hand down and straighten my arm. I plummet on my shoulder. What is this? Ice? I force myself back up and peer around.

How? My porch—it's covered. Seldom do I get snow on the porch, as it's covered by the floor above. Every inch is flooded with ice. In some sections, the ice is thick enough for a person to successfully skate across. I've never had this happen before. What's with this?

The ice closer to the door thins out and is saturated with brown stains. I see perforations inside the brown spots from melting ice. There's shattered glass throughout the mess. *Great.* There's my phone. To the right of my phone—a broken coffee mug handle. My favorite mug. I get it now. The early morning hit-and-run—mere coincidence.

My porch looks like a crime scene. I open my other eye. The blur is still there. I feel like an annihilated bystander. The murky vision reminds me of

what things looked like when I'd walk in my college apartment after nine hours of tailgating. Why was I outside in the first place? Did I eat breakfast this morning? Wait—what day is today?

I close my eyes. Make this go away. I crack an eyelid—yep, I'm still here. I would eat spiders if it meant escaping this moment. Quit wasting time with unrealistic thoughts, and get inside that door.

The stair railing is close enough. If I slide over and grab on to the side, I could pluck myself up to a sitting position. Yes, this could work. I drop on my stomach and exhale. I center my weight between my forearms and army crawl across the ice.

I hoist my right arm and whack the railing with my knuckle. "Brussels sprouts," I yelp. What did I say? I didn't even say it correctly. Brussels sprouts are disgusting. I think I have a concussion. I cup the side of the railing, tug myself up, and twist on to my butt. I want to scream until my throat is raw. It feels like I lowered my tailbone against a razor. I chomp down on my lip and feel tears.

Who can I ask for help? It must be early—not a single person in sight. Pathetic how city society adapts to commotion in which a loud accident fazed no one. I suppose it wouldn't have bothered me either if I wasn't laying in the front row of the action. Come on, focus. I don't have time to wait for someone to walk by. I should yell. Nope—last resort. Only cause a neighborhood scene as a last-ditch effort.

There are parts of a broken taillight scattered across my street. The door of a parked car is bashed in. I was right about the crash—it happened right in front of my home. Bird shit doesn't seem so bad now.

I scoot across the ice. My palms are numb to the bone, and my fingers tingle as I slide forward. I snatch my phone. The screen's shattered—I can relate.

I brush away a layer of glass. Call Jessica. She could hop in a cab and be here in minutes. Hurry up and call her—she'll help. No, don't ruin her day. I put my best friend through enough this past year, and she has a life to live too. Has there ever been a moment where I had to take care of her?

I drop the phone in my lap and slide toward the door. The rocking motion is making me nauseous. I'm dizzy. A trip to the hospital may be happening soon. Just call her—she won't care. I stop and look at my phone. I bite at my bottom lip. Am I her deadweight? She's never needed me like I've needed her, starting from the moment we met.

* * * *

Jessica and I were little kids and had the same recess. It was the same year I watched a nice girl turn into a monster before my eyes. Her name was Scarlett, and she was a nasty little brat.

Scarlett was taller than most kids and would talk about her older sisters all the time. She was my first bully. I learned basic math while keeping an eye on the devious little shit while I sat at my desk. If the teacher would direct a question at me, I would slouch in my seat and pray for her to keep her mouth shut. It was worse when she did things in front of the entire class. Watching her act so nice to everyone else in school confused me, causing me to think I was the problem.

She wasn't always mean to me, though. Scarlett and I sat next to each other on the bus, even played on the same soccer team for a year. One day coach appointed me captain, which caused her to have a temper tantrum on the field. A first encounter with jealousy was all it took to wake the devil inside her.

The bullying began with a snarl during class. I'd get an answer wrong and hear her giggle in the background. I wouldn't react, so she upgraded to snarky remarks about me to others—my clothing, my posture.

She would give intel about what her cool older sisters did and wore, which ironically differed from me every single time. A few times I fueled her fire by showing up the next day in what she explained was “cool,” only to hear her say, “Anna still doesn't get it.” I was too young to understand why she did it and too afraid to stick up for myself. We don't learn this until later in life, but the manipulators of society begin to stalk their prey prior to their victim's loss of innocence. They feel powerful over the powerless, which changes once the powerless discover their manipulator's intentions.

I let things go too far while the situation paralleled with my tolerance. What did I understand as a fifth grader? One afternoon the snotty little brat girl tripped me during recess and made fun of my red hair. It was the first time she got physical. She walked up from behind me and kicked the book lying next to me on the ground. A little blond girl witnessed the scene and came to my rescue.

“Leave her alone,” the little girl said.

The bully turned toward the little girl. “What did you say?”

“My friend says you're always picking on her. What did she ever do to you?” the girl asked.

I looked up in fear.

The bully walked toward the girl. “You want to say that again?”

“Yes, but get closer so I don’t have to yell so loud.” The blonde made a hand gesture, and a group of kids walked over.

The girl was from one of the other fifth-grade classes in our school. She glared at the bully. It was my first time witnessing a face-off. She was smaller than the bully, which made me nervous.

“Anna, right?” the little blonde hollered, ignoring the bully.

“Yes,” I said.

“You okay?” the blonde asked.

“I’m fine. I swear.”

The blonde walked my direction and stopped so she was face-to-face with the mean girl. Her supporters gathered around. She knew she was shorter but didn’t care. “Anna, come over and join us. We don’t treat people like she does.”

“Redheaded alien,” the bully muttered.

I got up and walked sideways toward the safety zone. The other kids from her class walked over in comfort. I wanted to cry.

“Did you make fun of her hair color?” the blond girl asked.

The bully rolled her eyes. “Yes, I made fun of her ugly hair.”

“I thought so. I would’ve walked away, but you put her down again.” The blond girl looked at the other kids. “Look how beautiful Anna’s hair is. It’s shining in the sunlight. Now look at hers.” She pointed at the bully. “You have shit-colored hair, and you’re just jealous. I have older sisters too, and they warned me about people like you. If I see you treat her or anyone like that again, you’ll regret it.”

“Grow up,” another voice from the support group shouted.

“No, don’t yell. We don’t act like her—we don’t bully. She just needed to be checked,” the blonde intervened. She took a few steps in my direction and turned back toward the bully. “We don’t leave people out, so if you want to be nice to everyone, you can play with us next time.”

I was stunned and didn’t know what to say. I watched my hero walk over to me.

“My name’s Jessica,” the girl said and put her hand on my shoulder for comfort.

“I’m Anna.” I hugged her.

That was the most mature thing I ever witnessed a kid do.

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