

Life Force Preserve

Book 1

Anna and the Resurgent of the Precious Blood

Courtney Leigh Pahlke

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.

