

# SCARED

*Michelle Brewer-Bunnell*

WERE THERE EVER A MOMENT IN THE HISTORY OF TIME that a woman could surpass her destiny in such a manner that she could take it over and shape it, Anna would have assumed that it would fall to someone brave and flawless. As it were, she was neither of those things and took an almost pride in the fact that she was entirely ordinary. She knew there would be no eternal glory in living her life, nor would there be great eulogies given in her death. These were the gentle understandings that gave her existence meaning as she opened her eyes, waking up for the day.

Anna stretched in her bed, feeling each muscle pull gently as her body remembered how to function. There was a gentle ache in her bones, which she wrote off as a reaction to her late night study habits. Rubbing her eyes, Anna swung her legs onto the floor, letting the chill of the wood seep into the soles of her feet. Her head hurt slightly and it wasn't until she stood up that she remembered exactly why she felt so poorly. She'd just gotten over the flu, and it was rather icy the week before. Anna had managed to keep her footing up until she had gotten into the school. The horde of people who had gone in before her had left a trail of water and ice all the way to her locker. The first step into the school was steady and as she lifted her foot to take another step, she'd felt hot and cold all over. The next thing she knew, Anna was on the floor.

It had taken Anna a few moments to realize where she was and what had happened. Her brain felt sloshy, her heart was racing and people were standing all around her, watching her get up. The principal

came over and asked if she was okay. Anna did the one thing she could compute: Anna lied. She claimed the floor was just slippery (which, in fact, it was) and that her foot had slipped on the water and that she was alright. After giving her a quick look over, the principal offered her his hand and she shook her head, pushed off from the floor and went to class. Anna tried to replay the situation over in her mind, but kept coming back to the same conclusion: she had not slipped. Anna had passed out.

The rest of the day went smoothly and Anna gradually overcame the queasy feeling in her stomach. She nibbled at lunch and dinner, telling her mother the same story she had told the principal when Anna told her about falling in the walkway of the school. Anna had done a little homework and gone to bed. The next morning when she woke up, Anna was sore and bruised all over.

The bruises were deep purple, like squashed plums with little blue borders. If they didn't hurt so badly, Anna would have kept poking them, to watch the colors change from the pressure. Anna had worn long sleeve shirts every day for a week to hide them and was rather curious to see at the end of that week that none of the bruises were showing any signs of yellowing. In fact, the more Anna examined her legs and arms in the mirror, they looked as if they got a little more purple every day. She didn't mind so much, but the middle of her back, where she assumed that she had landed was a deep wine colored mark. It was this bruise in particular that caused her so much trouble while attempting to sleep that she had been sleeping on her stomach,

which translated into not much sleep at all.

"Mom," Anna asked over her cup of coffee, "how long are bruises supposed to last? It's like a week, right?" She tried as hard as she could to keep a level voice, fighting the grumpiness that she knew resulted from her lack of sleep.

"That sounds about right, why? Are you okay?" Her mother did not look at her while she was cutting up tomatoes for that night's supper. Even so, her voice was a little shaky with concern. Anna knew that she would have to do some playing down of her own concern, just to make sure that her mother didn't go into a panic.

"Oh I'm fine. It's just the bruise on my back is still sore and I just want to sleep like a normal person again. I get so grumpy when I don't sleep well. No worries. I'm probably just impatient." Anna, convinced she had done a decent job glossing over the situation, took a big sip of coffee and began to pack up her school supplies. Even though she had her own concerns, she couldn't let her mother see how worried she actually was.

"Well. Let me see and I'll let you know how many more days I think you'll have to stomach it." Her mother winked her direction, alluding to the fact that she knew how Anna had been sleeping. Anna, catching the joke, snorted a laugh and pulled up her shirt to just under her bra band. Her mother, still with the knife in hand, turned around to look at Anna's back and gasped. Anna heard the knife hit the counter and shimmied her shirt back down so that she could face her mother.

"So I take it I have a couple

more days?" Anna tried to laugh off the shocked expression on her mother's face. "Or do I have like a big zit on my back? Or what?" Anna's voice trailed off as she noted that her mother's expression didn't lighten up.

"Mom. What's wrong?"

"How long ago did you get that bruise?" her mother stepped closer, as if she was afraid her daughter might collapse or run away. "Did you hurt yourself again?" Anna tried to piece together her mother's sentences, to formulate an idea of her own. All she could deduce was that her back looked pretty bad.

"I told you. Remember how I fell at school last week? I'm pretty sure my back got the worst of it, which is why it probably looks bad. But the ones on my arms and legs are way smaller. Honest. I feel fine. It was just a curiosity question anyway."

"Anna, why don't you go sit in the living room while I make an appointment with Doctor Mills." Her mother had already pulled the phone out of her pocket and was starting to scroll through her contacts. Anna could see her mother's hands trembling. "Mom, no really. I have school and I'm fine. Seriously. I have to go." Anna tried to argue with her mother, the grumpiness starting to show in her voice.

"Anna, you will sit on that couch, do you hear me? You will not be going back to school until you have the go-ahead from Doctor Mills. End of discussion. So sit down." Her mother's voice approached a bark by the time she ordered Anna to sit. She had the phone up to her ear, listening to the dial tone as she watched her daughter put her school supplies on the seat

beside her. Anna had not fought back, seeing the concern in her mother's eyes that so acutely mirrored her own, and knowing how out of character this was.

The drive to the doctor's office was a long one, but only from the sheer power of the awkward silence that passed undisturbed between Anna and her mother. When they finally pulled into the parking lot, Anna breathed a sigh of relief. Soon enough, she would be free to go back to school and her mother would no longer have to worry. Anna hated seeing her mother worry, but since her mother had filed for the divorce, that was all she really ever saw.

"I'm going to order some tests, just to rule out the nasty stuff and go from there. If you can, I'd like for you to get the lab work done today, and then the receptionist will set up an appointment for us to go over the results, say next week? I'll have them rush your results over to me and that way we can get you back to feeling better in no time, how's that?" Doctor Mills was a plump old man, but extremely good at his job. He listened to his patients and looked more like Santa Claus than a doctor. "And if you don't mind, Persephone, I'd like to talk to you while your daughter's getting the bloodwork done."

Anna marveled at the list of tests he wanted, not really knowing what it was exactly that he was looking for. She nodded, glad that her mother had taken over the conversation so that she didn't have to appear ignorant. However, her brain was able to piece together the fact that her mother's voice seemed distant on the walk to the lab on the next floor up. Through

her exhaustion, it became apparent that the doctor had appeared much more pleasant than he had been truthful. Her mother informed her that she would be out of school until after the results came in and they had gone over them. Anna just nodded and yawned.

The lab technician who was taking care of Anna was nice enough, but Anna still couldn't help but feel that this woman was secretly a vampire and using the whole phlebotomy job as a ruse for her real operations. Her scrubs were teal with aqua and white hearts, which accented her bright blue eyes and coppery brown hair. The woman smiled and introduced herself as Renee, but Anna was too busy mentally preparing for the pain that would be inflicted. Renee was an expert with cold hands and coached Anna through her procedure. Anna watched the blood seep from her arm into the vacuumed tube and before she realized it, she was done. Renee told her to put pressure on the wound and then turned away for a moment.

When Renee turned back around, Anna laughed. Renee had pulled out every roll of the ropey surgical tape that she had access to and wore them like rings. "Here's the deal. We can either go with an incredibly boring Band-Aid, a monster truck Band-Aid, or there's option three."

"What's option three?" Anna asked, smiling widely. Already, she had forgotten the pain of the needle that had been in her arm only seconds before.

"I like to think of option three as surgically inspired abstract art." Renee brandished her rolls of tape, wiggling her fingers back and forth. Anna noticed that Renee hadn't actu-

ally pulled out either of the other two options and nodded giddily when Renee added, "You pick out the colors; I will be the master artiste!" Anna of course, picked out the turquoise, black and neon pink rolls and true to her word Renee began to immediately and expertly tape up Anna's arm. Although Renee did not use as much of the tape as Anna might have, there was something crafty and elegant about the way the crook of Anna's arm turned out. It was like a little turtle shell of camouflage and Anna thanked her sincerely.

"Do you think we could stop anywhere to get something to eat? Or do we have enough money in the jar?" Anna asked as she reunited with her mother. Seeing Anna take an interest in food, her mother brightened up. Regardless of how much was in the jar, Anna's mother turned in to the closest restaurant and let Anna order everything she wanted. Anna had the feeling that the doctor had told her mother something while she had been in the lab with Renee. But what could he have possibly told her that would make her okay with spending money so frivolously?

Waiting at home for the labs to come in was one of the most agonizingly boring things Anna had ever done. Her mother had to work every day except the weekend and that meant four days of being by herself. After immediately balking at the idea, Anna soon found herself far too tired to mind. By the time the weekend came, she was sleeping more than she was awake. Her mother noticed, but said nothing, causing Anna to once again wonder what it was that she wasn't being told.

Monday morning was a driz-

zly grey with just enough sunshine to convince you it was still there, but not enough to warm you. Anna heard the phone go off only a fraction of a second before her mother and sat up to get it. She was feeling stronger, able to get up and move around without collapsing in exhaustion afterwards. Nevertheless, her mother bounded to the phone faster and picked it up, her shrill voice reverberating through the house. Anna heard her mother inform the person on the other end that they would be *there* in half an hour and Anna assumed that meant she had to be dressed. Anna picked out a pale blue shirt that was now slightly too big and jeans and pulled her hair into a bun. As she passed by the mirror, she gasped. It was as if Anna the girl had been replaced with Anna the ghost. She grabbed her makeup bag as her mother hollered for her to get in the car.

Anna did her makeup on the way up there, wishing she had been more practical and grabbed a coat. Her mother, seemingly aware of this fact, turned up the heat and Anna was grateful. She would learn her fate at this appointment and her mind began to wonder what exactly that fate would be. Mono seemed to jump right to the forefront of her mind, explaining the fatigue and the way she always felt sick, but that didn't seem right. Anna refused to let her mind go down the dark and twisted paths it wanted to as she walked into the doctor's office and was immediately ushered into one of the back rooms by an over-cheerful nurse.

Anna found a magazine inside the exam room and began to flip through the pages. It was a couple

months old and she knew that this was merely meant to pass the time, but her heart dropped at the page she had randomly flipped to. There was a little girl with no hair, on an advertisement about hospitals and saving lives and donating blood. Tears began to emerge from her eyes just as the doctor walked in. Anna fought back her emotions, trying to not let the doctor know what she was feeling. But it didn't matter. The doctor didn't appear to hide his own feelings, as the grim look passed over her mom and settled in on her.

"How are you feeling today, Anna?" He asked, any correlation she might have drawn to Santa now long gone. "Still sleeping through the day?" He kept his eyes on her even as her own traveled to her mother, who looked away out of sheer despair. So her mother had also been reporting her sleeping habits to the doctor. That's why her mother never said anything to her. Or maybe the doctor had told her mother to slip her some sleeping pills. That was a plausible theory, even if it was only conjecture.

"Well, I do so dearly enjoy the company of my bed, you see. It just sweet talks me into staying there and throws a terrible temper tantrum should I try to leave." Anna tried to laugh at her sarcastic response, but quickly stopped, noticing that her mother and doctor showed no signs of amusement.

"Anna, while I appreciate your attempt at humor, I must be sure you are entirely prepared and capable to handle the results of your test. Are you able to listen and be serious for a moment?" The man looked as though he had aged decades while uttering his sentence. Anna, growing insulted,

remarked:

“Look, doc, it’s not like I have cancer. How bad can the news be?” Anna’s mother guffawed as though in pain and Anna understood. So she did have cancer. That’s what all this was about. She was maybe even dying. Her mind no longer stopped her from going down the deep and twisted paths of her conscious and fear crept into her very soul. The more she comprehended, the more serious her face became. Anna had never known fear like this.

“Anna, I know this news is hard. But as I have told your mother, cancer is no longer the fearful disease it used to be. It’s no longer a death sentence. And your specific kind of cancer is a perfect example of this. In fact, there’s a new treatment out, and it looks like you might be an ideal candidate, having been so early in detection. Do you want to go into the specifics, or shall I give you some reading material first?”

Anna looked down at her list of suggested books, crossing off the very last one. That conversation seemed like years ago, when in fact it had been only a couple weeks. The treatment that the doctor had suggested had been a new form of chemo; it was like a concentration of little cancer killers seeping into her body, waiting to take out the enemy. But what Anna hadn’t known was that the medicine would also think her own body was the enemy. She grew worse and worse, barely being able to keep liquids down, let alone food. Her body wasted away while her face grew more and more bloated. The nurses all said this was normal, but she no longer felt normal. She felt like death.

Anna laid on the hospital

bed, waiting for the doctor to come and clear her for discharge, when she began to cough. It was a raspy kind of crackling cough that more often than not turned into bronchitis or something equally as dastardly. Anna’s mother grew nervous, offering her a glass of water, watching as her daughter choked on air. It was the panicked look in Anna’s eyes that sent her mother for the nurses. It was the panic in her mother’s eyes that made Anna close her own.

As she closed her eyes, she dreamed she was flying, up in the clouds. The air was pure up there, the clouds tasting just like snowflakes. But the view was to die for. Anna assumed that this is what she would do if she died right then; she would float among the clouds, basking in the sunlight and dancing until she was absorbed into the scenery. It would be a perfect existence.

Persephone watched as her daughter was put on a respirator and returned to a more acceptable shade of humanistic peach. Although her daughter never let on, she knew that chemo had to be so terrible to endure. The reading list that the doctor had given her did not mention all of the side effects, but it made it quite clear that Anna was going to pass through hell just to get her chance to live. And Anna didn’t look like she was doing so well. Anna appeared peaceful, just sleeping there on the hospital bed. But the medical team told her that it didn’t look like Anna was strong enough to breathe on her own yet. Anna’s mother took that yet to mean at all and so the doctors and nurses put her into sedation.

On the third day of her uncon-



sciousness, Anna started having heart troubles. Her heart seemed to pump at odd intervals and without much order. It was that night, after all the other visitors had gone away, that Anna's mother pulled the curtain around her daughter and began to pray.

"Mother Goddess, it's me again. I know I haven't done this in a while, but I don't know what else to do. It's my daughter, Anna. I can't..." She struggled to keep the tears from her eyes, her voice shaking. "She's all I have and she's so brave. But my little warrior princess can only fight so hard and she's barely hanging on. I don't even know that you're listening, but I'll do anything for my baby girl. I know I'm nothing special, but I will take her place if that's what you ask of me. Please keep her safe and hold her hand, as she crosses through the Summerland." Anna's mother could no longer control her weeping and she was thankful Anna was in a medicated slumber. "Give blessed life to Anna's body, by Danu's love, so mote it be."

Anna was able to come out of the induced coma the very next day. Her lungs had been fighting for their own right to breathe and Anna coughed up the tube just a little while after that. Within a week, she was allowed to go back home. Her mother watched over her every night, sleeping in the same room, in the rocking chair from Anna's childhood. Usually she woke up before Anna did, and there were no hiccups or surprises in that schedule. Which is why the Sunday before she had to return to work, her heart dropped as Anna screamed out.

Anna was standing there, a frail ghost of the girl she once had been, looking at her pillow. Thinking

it was a spider or something equally as troubling, her mother grabbed a book with which to squash it. But it wasn't a pest that caused Anna such terror, it was something far more personal. On her pillow, the cruelest of all fates, was her hair. Anna, in the midst of her whimpers and gasping sobs, turned toward her mother and crumpled to the ground.

"I'm going to die." She whispered, dropping her head. "I'm ugly and fat and now my hair is falling out and I'm going to die! This has all been for nothing!" Hysteria washed over Anna as her mother held her close.

"You're not going to die until you're an old woman, with thick braids and a husband and a hundred grandchildren. I promise, sweetheart." Her mother was careful to keep her voice calm and collected, the exact opposite of how she felt.

"Liar." Anna shrugged away from her mother's embrace. "I'm going to die and I'm going to die alone. There is no justice or hope left for me. Not anymore. I'm so scared, Mom. I never wanted this. Any of this. I didn't even have a choice." And as her voice grew more and more quiet, Anna's resolve grew stronger. She dropped the hair she had been holding back onto her pillow and looked her mother in the eyes. "If this is how my destiny looks, I think it's time I laugh in its face."

Anna took a chunk of hair in her hands and began to pull with all her might, watching handful after handful fall from her head. Her mother just sat there, waiting for her daughter to realize what she was doing. As Anna approached the end of her hair, her mother stood up and smiled at her.

"My beautiful daughter, let me

help you." Her mother hugged her and then backed away slowly. "I may not be able to make your hair grow back or cure your cancer, but you will never be alone." Anna watched as her mother went into the bathroom and picked up the electric razor. "Will you help me with the back parts, darling?" Anna began to object, but her mother had already started to cut away her hair. As they worked together, tears and hair began to fall in unison, until they both stood there perfectly bald. Persephone kissed Anna's head and together they walked out to the kitchen.

"It's entirely bizarre how much we take for granted something like hair. We just expect it to always be there, like the ones we love." Anna's mother wiped away the latest tear from her eyes. "Life may never be fair or just or give us everything we want. But no matter where life takes you, so long as you have love and faith, you'll have all you really need. So, I stand here today, not as a beautiful student, like my precious daughter was, but as a reminder that you can never take your lives or anything in them, for granted. Use your education, make mistakes, and change your mind. But in the end, love fiercely, love openly and you'll never be alone. Thank you, class of 2011, for accepting my daughter as one of your own and in Anna's own words: 'hell yea, we made it!'" Persephone watched as three hundred of her daughter's friends flipped their caps into the sky, presenting their bald heads for the world to see. Her vision clouded at the show of loyalty. They had all shaved their heads for Anna and she knew that her daughter was looking down, smiling. Because in this moment, she was no longer scared, she was loved.