

Excerpt from *Ankou* by Hannah Charlesworth

“Anna!” The voice was faint, but I knew it was trying to wake me up.

“Go away!” I said.

But the voice became more insistent, and I felt something hard push on my shoulder.

“Anna! Wake up!”

I opened my eyes to Colby, nudging me with the bottom end of his scythe. “Wha—?” I looked at the alarm clock next to my bed. It was 1:13 a. m. “What are you doing here?”

“I need your help.”

“Oh, please. I told you I wasn’t going to talk to your family and friends—”

“It’s not that.”

“Then what is it?” I said.

“In forty-five minutes, Tanner’s going to die, unless you do something.”

My stomach dropped. “What?”

“Tanner’s going to die. Now come on! We have to go!”

I jumped off my bed and ran to my closet, then paused. “Wait, this isn’t a trick is it?”

“Do you seriously think that I would joke about something like this? Please, you have to help him!” His eyes were darting back and forth, and his feet were all jumpy. He was scared.

“Okay,” I could feel my voice shaking. “Will you leave for a moment so I can put on some clothes and—”

“We don’t have time for that. We need to leave now!”

“Okay! Okay!”

I shoved my shoes and my coat on over my pajamas and ran outside. My brother’s bike was leaning against the back of the house. I looked at it for a moment. I normally didn’t ride

bikes in the dark. With my eyesight it was too dangerous. But walking was not an option. And I refused to wake up my dad and ask him for a ride. So I took the bike and sped away. Colby sat in his ghostly cart and flew beside me.

“You need to move faster!” he called.

“Do you have any idea how hard it is to ride a bike in the dark when you’re a visually impaired person?” I snapped. “If I’m moving too slowly for you, why don’t you give me a ride?”

“Sorry, I can’t bring you onto the cart. I’d have to touch you to get you in, and, well, that might kill you.”

“I was afraid you’d say that.”

“Do you know where Tanner lives?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“Okay, just follow me!”

The cart lurched in front of me, and I followed it for what felt like forever. My legs burned, and with every breath, the cold air stabbed my lungs until I was almost positive they must have been bleeding. And my heart. My heart was thumping so fast, I wondered if I would even make it to Tanner’s house.

Finally, the cart pulled over. I parked the bike and then rested for a minute, panting and looking at the house. All of the lights were off.

“What now?” I could barely get the words out between breaths.

“It’s 1:39, which gives us . . . twenty-five minutes to save Tanner’s life.”

Instead of slowing down, my heart started beating faster. “What do we do?”

“Well, you could knock on the door. His mom might still be up. Or you could just knock on his window—his room’s on the first floor. Actually, that’s probably the best thing to do. Go knock on his window, and then make sure he doesn’t eat any pretzels.”

“Pretzels?”

“Yeah, that’s what’s going to kill him.”

I was confused, but I nodded and followed Colby to the back of the house. What on earth was I doing? If Colby was pulling my leg, I was going to bring him back to life and kill him. Knocking on some boy’s window at two in the morning? That was crazy! Tanner was going to think I was the insane. And what was I going to tell him? “I can see your dead best friend, and yes, I did write that note because Colby is an idiot, so hand over the pretzels before you die.” I shook my head. I’d have to think of something better than that.

Colby stopped in front of one of the windows and pointed. I slammed my back against the wall next to it and tried not to cry.

“What’s wrong? Why aren’t you doing anything?”

I shook my head.

“Seriously, Anna? Are you really going to let my best friend to die?”

I glared at him. “Well, don’t you want him to?”

Colby’s jaw dropped, and he stumbled back a step. “Did you—did you really just say that?”

My face flushed, and I looked away. “I’m sorry, Colby, I didn’t mean it. I’m just nervous.”

He was silent for a moment. “Yeah. It would be nice to have my best friend again. But being dead, well, it sucks.”

I sucked in a sharp breath.

“Besides, I think our friends and family have been through enough already. And I can’t take him away from his mom. She needs him.”

“What do you mean when you say you ‘can’t take him from his mom’?”

“Oh, I—”

I looked at him. He was panicking again.

“I’ll tell you later, I promise, but right now, Tanner needs you. His window is right here. Just knock on it.”

I wanted to throw up, but I stepped away from the wall and faced the window. There was a faint light coming from the TV in Tanner’s room. It took me a minute to find Tanner himself. He just looked like a pile of dirty laundry on the floor. He wasn’t moving. Was he already dead? He reached for a bag of chips, or pretzels, or something and started eating. Oh good. He was still alive.

“Come on, Anna.”

Every part of me wanted to run. This was so awkward! How could I do this? I took a deep breath and told myself that I could do this—maybe. But even if I couldn’t do it, I had no choice. I lifted my hand and knocked.

Nothing happened.

I knocked louder.

Tanner’s head snapped toward me. I jumped. But he didn’t get up. He just stared at me. I waited a moment and then knocked again.

He slowly pushed himself up, as if every movement was agony, and dragged himself across his room to the window.

I stepped back as he opened it.

“What are you doing here?” he said.

“C-C-Can I have your pr-pretzels?”

“What?”

I had never seen a more confused look on anyone’s face before.

“Can I have your pretzels?” I said a little louder.

“Why?”

“I need them.”

Tanner stared at me.

I could feel my insides being wrung and twisted by my embarrassment, so instead of crying, I fixed my eyes on the TV behind Tanner. Had I seen that show before? It looked familiar, but it was hard to see from where I was standing.

“Um, well, I guess you can have some of—”

“No.” I snapped back to attention. “I need all of them.”

He stared at me again, and again, I felt like I was going to die.

“Please,” I said. “It’s important.”

He scrunched his eyebrows together, but he nodded and went and grabbed a big bag of pretzels.

“Here you go,” he said, holding it out to me.

“Thank you.” I took the pretzels and turned to leave, but Colby stood in front of me with his arms crossed.

“That’s not good enough,” Colby said. “He still has chips and stuff in there. You need to make sure he doesn’t choke on anything.”

I spun around. “Wait!”

Tanner stopped pulling down the window.

“Can I have your chips too?”

“Really?”

I nodded.

He sighed and grabbed his chips.

“Actually, can I have all the food you have in there?”

He took in a sharp breath. “Seriously? No! What are you playing at? Is this some kind of joke?”

“No! It’s nothing like that.”

“Then why are you here?”

“I-I,” I looked at Colby, but he just shrugged, “I don’t know. I just had a feeling.”

“You had a feeling?” He rubbed his temples, and after a minute, he laughed. “So you followed this feeling to my house at two in the morning to take my food?”

I blushed. What was I supposed to say? I couldn’t believe I had done this, but I told myself it didn’t matter. I couldn’t let him die.

“Your name’s Anna, right?”

I nodded.

“We’re in gym together.”

I nodded.

“Aren’t you the girl whose mom—” he stopped and looked at me.

“Yes,” I said quietly. I felt tears sting the back of my eyes and willed them to go away.

But it was too much. Between my exhaustion and embarrassment, I didn’t stand a chance when

he brought up my mom. Watching her slowly die from her illness was the most terrible thing that I had ever been through. Yes, after she died Colby communicated between us, but it wasn't the same as sitting down and talking with her. And I lived with the constant fear that he would stop, that each conversation would be the last, and Colby would disappear, and I would never talk with my mom again. I just wanted to see her and hear her voice, not Colby's.

I burst into tears.

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! I should know better. I shouldn't have said anything."

I wiped my eyes and my nose with my sleeves. "It's okay. I'm not mad."

"Here," he ran back into his room, grabbed all of his snacks, and dumped them at my feet, "you can have them. Is there anything else you need?"

"No, no. I'm fine." I just wanted to run away.

"You sure? Aren't you cold? Do you want me to make you hot chocolate?"

I shook my head and looked at Colby. He was messing with his smart watch.

"Wow, that's weird," he said.

"What?" I said.

"Nothing. Tanner's going to be all right, but I'll have to go right after this. I'll come by tomorrow with your mom, I promise."

I smiled. "Okay."

"Who are you talking to?" Tanner stuck his head out of the window.

"No one."

Tanner looked skeptical.

“Thanks for the food,” I said. I bent down and picked it all up. “I think I’ll go now. You should get some sleep. It’s a school night, you know.” I wanted to smack my forehead. What was wrong with me?

“Um, okay. Good night.”

I nodded, then ran away.

That was so embarrassing! How was I going to face him at school the next day? How was I going to face anyone at school the next day or ever again? Tanner probably thought I was a freak, and I was sure everyone in the school would know how much of a freak I was by lunch.

I fell down next to my bike and vomited.

“Anna? Are you okay?” Colby was standing behind me.

I just cried. The tears warmed my face in the cold air. I closed my eyes and let them run, let the anger and frustration and embarrassment squeeze out of me.

Colby stood there and watched me, and then he lifted his stick and patted me on the back.

“It’s okay,” he said. “You did the right thing. Because of you, Tanner’s going to live.”

I nodded then shakily gathered Tanner’s food.

“What do I do with all of this?” I said. I could hear my exhaustion in my voice.

Colby shrugged. “Leave it on his doorstep?”

I nodded and stood up. As I stumbled to Tanner’s door, I thought I saw the shutters move.

“Okay,” Colby said beside me. “I have to go. Do you know how to get home?”

“I think so.”

“Alright, I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Cool.” He went to his cart, glancing at me a couple times before he left.



I lifted my hand and waved softly as he drove away; then I looked at the pile of vomit next to my brother's bike and sighed.