

A photograph of travel gear including a brown suitcase, a purple backpack, and a blue hat on a paved surface. The suitcase is open, showing a blue interior with various items like a camera and a small bag. The purple backpack is next to it, and a blue hat is placed on top of the suitcase. The background is a grey, cracked pavement with some small green plants growing in the cracks.

**ANNA
CASEY'S
PLACE
IN THE
WORLD**

by the author of **CROSSING JORDAN**
Adrian Fogelin

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www.adrianfogelin.com*

*For my parents,
Maria B. and Carl E. Fogelin,
who taught me the meaning of home.*

*Thanks to Peachtree editors Vicky Holifield and Sarah Helyar Smith,
who helped make Anna the girl she is today.*

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Chapter One

THE EXPLORER



Mrs. Riley hadn't even started the car when the purse on the seat beside her beeped. "Shoot," she said. She pulled out the pager, checked the number, and said "Shoot" again. "I have to make a quick call, kids. Eb, Anna, talk, you two. Get acquainted." Then she dashed up the steps to the agency.

Sitting in the back, all I could see of the boy was his skinny neck and his short, bristle haircut. I undid my seat belt, slid up, and rested my arms on the seat. "Hi, Eb. So, you're ten?"

He was all scooped up against the door, staring at the Band-Aids on his knees. His legs were spaghetti-thin.

"You don't look ten," I said.

"And you don't look twelve," he shot back, still staring at his knees.

"I guess we're both small for our ages."

No answer.

"Do you think we'll like our new home?"

"No." He wouldn't look at me.

I hung over the seat a little more. He turned toward the window. "Maybe we will," I said, talking to the back of his head. "If we do, and everything works out so that we stay, I mean *really* stay, I'm going to get a cat."

I caught a quick glimpse of blue eyes, then he was looking out the window again. After a long pause he asked, "Why a cat?"

"I like cats. Don't you?"

"Never had one."

"I had a cat named Buck when I lived with my grandmother. When she died we moved to my aunt and uncle's—Buck and I did, I mean."

"Where's old Buck now?"

"He got hit by a car the second day we were there."

"He did?" Eb was still looking away, but I saw his ears lift, the way they do when someone smiles. "Was he like...squished?"

"Yeah."

Up went the ears again. "Cool."

I slid back in my seat. *Cool? No cat for him. Forget it. Any cat we get will be mine. But first I have to be sure that I'm staying, because cats don't like moving around.* When we lived at my grandmother's, Buck spent mornings on one windowsill, afternoons on another. That's enough change for a cat. And that's why I never got another one. All the places I'd lived in the last four years? It wouldn't have been fair to the cat.

Suddenly electronic burps and bleeps started coming from the front seat. Eb must have slipped some kind of video game out of the pocket of his baggy shorts. "Die, dark lord!" he cackled, and the toy in his lap hissed like a bug zapper.

"I hope we do get to stay," I said softly, talking to myself, not him.

But his voice came back over the seat. "You can stay. Not me." There was a sizzle as he fried another lord of darkness. "Anyway, I'm allergic to cats."

The driver's door opened, and Mrs. Riley tossed her purse back in. "Is everybody ready? Seat belts on!"

I did my belt, then picked up the pack from the seat beside me and hugged it. My suitcase was in the trunk, but my explorer's pack stays with me, always. I keep all my important stuff in it: my notebook, postcards, pocketknife, waterproof matches, my family picture, my

Boy Scouts of America Explorer's Manual—not that I'm a boy. But I *have* done some exploring.

I've seen quite a bit for twelve, lived lots of places with aunts and uncles and cousins. But relatives aren't like parents. They don't have to keep you if they get divorced, or if they need your room for a new baby, or if their arthritis gets bad. They just pass you along until, one day, you run out of relatives. Then you have to go with someone like Mrs. Riley. Mrs. Riley is a social worker for the State of Florida. I was one of her cases. So was Eb.

"We're getting close now," said Mrs. Riley. "Would you mind putting that game away, Eb?"

The chirping and beeping went on until Eb yelled, "Yes! Total annihilation!"

"Anna, dear?" Mrs. Riley gave me a smile in the rearview mirror. "Take your hat off so Miss Dupree can see what a pretty girl you are."

I slid my denim hat off, set it on top of my pack, and rested my chin on its wide, floppy brim. My uncle used to call it his bush hat. He let me keep it when he saw that I wore it every minute I wasn't in bed.

"Now kids," said Mrs. Riley, "Miss Dupree is a first-time foster mother, and a personal friend of mine, so you two will be extra nice, won't you?"

I nodded.

She turned to Eb for nod number two, but he was all slumped down, as if turning the game off had turned him off too.

We rode in silence until Mrs. Riley announced, "Here's your new neighborhood." I closed my eyes and held my breath for luck. Then I looked.

The houses in our new neighborhood were small, yards crammed with dogs and bicycles, birdbaths and huge old trees. A telephone pole with a basketball hoop nailed to it cast its shadow across the chalk drawings in the road.

"It certainly looks as if there are plenty of kids," Mrs. Riley observed. "How wonderful!"

Eb pulled his head down between his shoulders like a turtle.

We slowed in front of a white house with green shutters. No toys or bicycles littered its perfect lawn. The shrubs that guarded the door looked as if they had come out of a giant ice cream scoop. Just as Mrs. Riley turned in, I saw a small, pointy face peeking between a pair of curtains. Miss Dupree was waiting for us.

This could be better than relatives. Miss Dupree had chosen to become a foster mother. That meant she wanted us. Well, maybe not us specifically. But she must have wanted kids. It was a start.

As the front door opened, Mrs. Riley sang out, "Good morning, Miss Dupree." With a hand on each of our backs, she marched us up the walk. "Here they are! Anna Casey and Eb Gramlich." She introduced us as if we were movie stars, then gave each of us an extra little shove. "Kids, this is your new foster mother, Miss Dupree."

Miss Dupree patted our shoulders the way you'd pat a dog you were afraid was going to jump up, and then she folded her arms. She looked scared. Like Eb and me, Miss Dupree was small. Her brown hair was short and fluffy. She wore eyeglasses so thick, she seemed to peer at us from underwater. She looked Eb over first. Maybe she was wondering why he wore a long-sleeved shirt when it was so hot. Maybe she wondered how anyone could be that skinny. "Your name is Eb?"

When he didn't answer, I rushed in. "That's right, It's Eb."

Her eyebrows went up.

"I know," I said, "it takes some getting used to. E plus B. Eb. It doesn't seem like enough, does it? It's more like a hiccup than a name." I knew I was blabbering. I was pretty nervous.

"It's nice to meet you, Eb," she said.

Eb stared at his sneakers.

Then she turned to me. "So, this is Anna."

I smiled my class-picture smile, lips closed to hide my chipped front tooth. Whatever she had hoped for, it didn't seem to be a kid with too many freckles and mouse-colored hair, a girl in a hand-me-down blouse two sizes too big. But that was okay. I'd grow on her.

Mrs. Riley got our paperwork out of the car. "Emergency numbers are up front." She pushed her half glasses up on her nose and

opened the folder labeled Gramlich, E. “As I told you on the phone, Eb has a little problem with asthma, but it’s being managed.” She turned to Eb. “You know what to do for your asthma, don’t you, Eb?”

Eb’s arms hung at his sides.

“Don’t worry,” I told Miss Dupree. “I’m sure he knows.”

Mrs. Riley opened the trunk of her car. As I dragged my suitcase up the walk, I heard her say in a low voice, “Anita, I want to thank you again for taking the boy on such short notice. We just *had* to get him out of there.”

Seeing me, she went back to her official voice. “Be good, you two. If there’s a problem, here’s a number where you can reach me.” She gave each of us a business card and a kiss on the cheek. She engulfed Miss Dupree in a hug. “Relax, Anita. You’ll do just fine.” I put my hat back on as soon as she drove away.

“Come, children, let me show you your new home.” Miss Dupree sounded fake-happy, with scared underneath. I kept smiling and Eb kept frowning, but it didn’t matter. Our new foster mother darted up the steps and held the door without actually looking at either of us.

The entry room was tiny, with nothing in it but artificial flowers on a small table, an empty coat rack, and the strong smell of fresheners and deodorizers and cleaning products all trying to outdo each other.

“You can hang your hat up, Anna.”

“No thank you, Miss Dupree. I’ll keep it with me. It’s my lucky hat.”

“Hats are for outside, Anna. Hang it up, please.”

My hat drooped on the rack. It was an old hat, and it looked lonely hanging there all by itself. Compared to the light wall-to-wall carpet, it seemed dirty. I looked down at my worn sandals and Eb’s junky high-tops. *What if our shoes leave marks?* I worried.

We walked through the living room and into the kitchen, which was where Miss Dupree seemed to want to start the tour. “This is the kitchen,” she said.

Eb rolled his eyes.

“It’s nice,” I said.

It *was* nice, but terminally clean. The glossy white table had never had a glass of orange juice spilled on it, I bet, or eraser crumbs from someone changing answers on a homework assignment. The only things on the counter were the dish soap, a bowl of potpourri, and a can of Super-Kill bug spray.

We cut back through the living room. “And this is my office,” she said, opening a door. Inside, a video camera was trained on a chair in front of a blue backdrop. A computer sat on a desk. “I run a dating service called ‘Perfect Match,’” she said. “It’s for busy professionals who want to fall in love but need a little help scheduling it.” On the wall behind her was a map of the United States with pins stuck in it.

I moved in for a closer look. “What’s the map for?” I asked. Maps are my hobby.

“Some of my clients want to locate people they’ve lost track of. High school sweethearts, mostly. The pins are successful finds.” She put a hand on my shoulder and steered me out of the room. “Everything in a business like mine is confidential, I’m afraid, so this room is off limits.” She closed the door with a little click.

“This is the living room. Yes, Eb,” she added before he had a chance to roll his eyes again. “The living room. I do some business in here too.”

The room looked a lot like a doctor’s office. All the furniture was white. On the coffee table, next to magazines arranged in neat rows, were two thick photo albums, one pink, one blue. Each said Likely Prospects on its cover. “I greet clients in here,” she said, “serve them coffee, give them a first look at potential partners.” She ran a hand over the cover of Likely Prospects, pink. “But most of the time the three of us can use it for sitting around or watching TV.” I tried to imagine the three of us sitting around. It wasn’t easy.

“Now Anna, I hope you’ll like the next room.” Miss Dupree looked excited. “I decorated it just for you.” She flung open a door.

The room was nonstop pink—the walls, the bed, the curtains. Even the top of the trash can had a ruffle that matched the paint. It was really, really ugly.

“Well, Anna?” She held her breath a moment. “Do you like it?”

The color made my stomach hurt. The ruffles were stupid. It was totally the wrong kind of room for an explorer. But she had fixed it just for me. “It’s great, Miss Dupree,” I said. “Super, really.”

She relaxed and smiled. “I’m so glad you like it. Now Eb, I apologize. I wasn’t expecting two. Your room is not as nice as Anna’s, but we can work on it.” She led us up a dark flight of narrow stairs.

“Wow!” I said as we stepped into a tiny room tucked under the roof. An air conditioner hummed in one of the two small windows in its sloping walls. I ran over to the other window, which framed a huge old tree. “You’re so lucky, Eb! You could climb right through this window into the tree.”

“I’ve been meaning to get some of those branches trimmed back,” Miss Dupree fussed. “But of course, Anna is kidding, Eb. That would be too dangerous.”

“Not for a good tree-climber. See that branch? I’d have to stretch, but I could get to it.” Then I remembered the ruffly pink room. Maybe Miss Dupree didn’t want a good tree-climber. I sat down quietly on the edge of the bed and looked around.

It seemed as if all the interesting things that weren’t allowed downstairs were up in the attic. Mysterious trunks and boxes were stacked on one side of the room. My hat would have felt right at home hanging with the other old hats on the rack in the corner. I flopped back on the bed, which was soft and deep and feathery. “Where’d you get all this great stuff?” I asked.

“It belonged to my mother,” she said. “She never threw out a thing.”

Lucky for you, I thought. And lucky for Eb. He was going to have this room. He should have been jumping for joy, but he hadn’t budged from the top of the stairs.

“What happened to your mom?” he asked. “Did she croak?”

“Yes, she died several years ago.”

Eb eyed the leaning boxes as if Miss Dupree’s dead mother was in one of them.

“It’s dusty up here,” he said. “It’s giving me an asthma attack. I’ll sleep on the couch.” He clomped back down the steps.

Miss Dupree hurried after him. I wanted to explore the attic room, but I followed them.

Back in the living room, Miss Dupree glanced at her all-white couch, then at the grubby boy who thought he was going to sleep on it.

“Hey, Eb,” I said. “I’ll trade rooms with you.”

“But Anna,” Miss Dupree cut in, “I fixed the pink room just for you.” She took a second look at her couch. “You’re sure you wouldn’t mind?”

And that’s how I got the treasure room and Eb got the one with the frilly garbage can.

I grabbed my suitcase before he could change his mind. As I dragged it up the stairs, it thumped against the edges and almost pulled my arm out of the socket. Not that there was much in it, just the usual socks and underwear plus some old clothes from my twin cousins, Jenny and Janice. What made it heavy was the stones.

The first thing I did was line them up on the windowsill, in order. Stone number one, a chunk of Maine granite, belonged to my grandmother originally. She lived in Maine all her life until she got married. When I asked her why she kept it, she said, “When you leave a place, you need something to help you remember.”

Grandma died when I was eight—one of the top worst things that ever happened to me. After the funeral I ran down to the pond behind her house and grabbed a rock from the bank. It was nice and flat. My cousin Janice wanted to skip it across the pond, but I put it in my pocket. I’ve done the same thing in each place since—picked up a stone to help me remember.

Massachusetts, New Jersey, Virginia, North Carolina. Each stone came from a little further south, like I’d been tumbling down the

map. My last stop was at the top edge of Florida, just south of the Georgia line. Now here I was in Tallahassee. My Tallahassee stone just had to be the last one. If I kept going, I'd fall right off the map.

Once my stones were arranged on the windowsill, I sat down cross-legged on the bed and undid the buckles on my pack. I slipped out the framed photograph that sat on top.

This picture came with me every time I moved to a new place. In it was a man with longish hair and a pretty woman with freckles, like mine. The baby on her hip had one sock on and one bare foot. All three of them were smiling. The one-sock baby was me, Anna. The two smiling grownups were my parents, Josh and Mindy Casey. Sitting on my new bed, I smiled back. This was the last picture ever taken of them.

I looked deeper into the picture. Swimming in the lake behind my parents and me were most of the relatives I'd lived with since the accident. There was Aunt Linda, who raised canaries in cages in her basement, and Aunt Betsy and Uncle Harry. They used to sit me in a chair in the corner when they thought I was getting too wild. The two pairs of feet sticking out of the water belonged to Jenny and Janice. They were doing underwater handstands. Off to one side I could see the back of Grandma's head. Just her white rubber bathing cap was sticking out of the water. I wished I had a better picture. One where she didn't look so much like a lightbulb.

I missed every one of them. Especially Aunt Eva and Uncle Charles, the last ones to have me. They were in the picture too, standing ankle-deep in the water, holding hands and laughing. The picture was taken before they were married. My cousins, Mark and Macy, hadn't been born. And now my Aunt Eva and Uncle Charles weren't married anymore, and all of us were scattered, me the farthest.

I put my picture on the table by the bed and took out my explorer's notebook. I opened it and wrote my new address and the date at the top of a fresh page.

Uncle Charles used to say he joined the Navy to see the world. I was seeing the world too. One neighborhood at a time.