

CHAPTER ONE

Anna

If I never pull another trailer again, I'll be a happy camper. And it doesn't even need to be a camping trailer. I'll gladly include the moving variety, like the one holding most of my worldly possessions as I haul them from southeast Colorado to my new home in Grantsville, Texas. Have you ever accidentally fishtailed on the freeway? I have. Not fun. I kept my panicked shrieks to a minimum. They lasted no more than five minutes. And I didn't cry. I'd pat myself on the back if I wasn't afraid it would cause another fiasco. Even my playlist of classic rock doesn't quite soothe me. I'm tempted to skip Steppenwolf's *Born To Be Wild* when it comes on, because I'm feeling anything but wild, but I'm keeping my hands firmly on the steering wheel for the rest of the trip.

I normally don't enjoy moving—who does, right?—even without hauling hundreds of pounds behind me, but this time is different. I'm too excited about the destination to care about the long hours I spent packing, and the hours of unpacking I have in my future. Grantsville awaits, a place my family has visited too many times to count over the years—summers, holidays, birthdays. That's the special part about Gram and Gramps' place, right? Now Gramps and I will be spending a lot more time together.

Roomie, here I come!

The reason isn't what any of us would've chosen, but Gramps' last stroke took a greater toll on him. He *is* eighty-two, after all. The partial paralysis on his left side has increased, despite his physical therapy, making it necessary for some changes. His resistance to said changes has been understandable. It's hard for anyone to lose their sense of independence. He has repeatedly refused to even look at assisted living centers, or consider moving anywhere else, for that matter; not when his

beloved Jean—my dear Gram—is buried in Grantville’s cemetery. And don’t even think about mentioning hiring some stranger to stop by the house to ‘*poke their big nose in his business*’. No hospice, no nurse, no assistant, not even a housekeeper. Gramps is convinced they’ll either rob him or bore him to death.

The only acceptable alternative is for our family to step in. I happen to have the most flexibility with my job—I freelance as an ASL interpreter, as well as teach online classes. My sister, Nicole, is still in college, and our parents have their hands full with Benny. His nonverbal autism is the reason I decided to major in both ASL and education. Though his progress over the years has been slow at times, he continues to amaze us all.

Since Gramps and I have always been close, my move to join him in Texas was a no-brainer. He’ll get the assistance he needs, even if he calls it babysitting, mostly as a joke, and the rest of us will have peace of mind that he isn’t alone.

Taking a right turn onto Beehive Lane, I can’t help but grin at the familiar tree-lined street and simple rambler-style houses, each painted in a bright, sometimes eclectic, color. Gramps’ is a buttery yellow with black trim, taking the bee theme seriously. He insists he just likes yellow, and the black was on sale.

Instead of trying, and likely failing, to maneuver into the driveway, I pull my SUV and the trailer alongside the front curb. I’m a day earlier than planned, but Gramps loves surprises. And by that, I mean he loves jumping out at random times, in random places to scare whoever might be passing by. His favorite victim is my dad, who never fails to let out a rather girlish squeal. For a guy his age, you’d think Gramps would have some consideration for a person’s ticker.

Now, I don’t plan to scare him, but I *am* eager to see his smile and hear him call out his usual—“Is that my Banana Anna?”

I know it's a cliché nickname, but yellow happens to be *my* favorite color too. Same with Gram's. She left us five years ago. Her grave is consistently adorned with some variety of yellow flowers, adding extra brightness to an otherwise somber place. I plan to head there later with a big bouquet of sunshiny daisies.

I turn off the ignition and reach for my phone, typing out a quick message to the family group text, informing them I arrived safely. Responses come right away.

Dad— Good to know. Be careful when you open the trailer. Things shift.

Mom— Yay! Give Gramps a hug for me. We'll see the two of you in a few weeks when you come for our anniversary party.

Nic— I hope the spare room we used to share during our visits is still decorated with bees and butterflies. DON'T YOU DARE CHANGE IT!

Chuckling at my sister's vehemence—there's no way I'd change the room—I sling my purse over my shoulder and exit the SUV. I head up the walkway, hop onto the porch like I used to do as a kid, for old times sake, and rap my knuckles on the yellow door. Rocking back and forth on my heels, I take a glance at the potted plants on the porch, noticing one has something resembling a fairy garden. How unexpectedly interesting...

When I get no answer, I knock again, then step over to the frosted window next to the door and peer inside. No movement from what I can see. I'm not too alarmed, though. With it being late afternoon, I know Gramps is likely over at the senior center a few blocks away, challenging—

and clobbering—some of his buddies in a chess game or two. If he had a cell phone, I'd call him. Guess that's something to add to the 'to do' list.

I move off the porch and, hands on hips, look down at the front garden, trying to remember which of the faux rocks hides the spare key. There are at least fifteen to consider. Gramps is sneaky like that. Unless he changed it recently, I'm pretty sure it's one of the black ones. Stooping down, I lift one at a time, sliding the little mechanism underneath to reveal either an empty space or a key. So far, all are empty-

"Are you a bur-ger-lar?" a high-pitched voice asks behind me.

Startled, I start to topple over as I swing my head around to see who belongs to the adorable question. An equally adorable girl with pale blonde pigtails and a half-serious, half-curious expression stands on the walkway, her little arms crossed.

I manage to turn myself and sit on the grass with a modicum of grace, which is definitely *not* my middle name. It's Liesl. Mom's a fan of *The Sound of Music*. Unfortunately, I'm not the best at singing. "Depends," I say with a smile. "Are you with the police?"

The girl's eyebrows pinch, as if the question confuses her, but then she lets out a laugh. "I don't have any job. I'm only five." She pauses, thinking for a moment. "But I *am* almost six."

"I see," I say, reaching for a dandelion growing among a cluster near my knee. "I'm not a burglar. This is my Gramps' house, and I'm moving in."

"You belong to Grandpa Joe?" the girl asks brightly, until another frown settles on her face. "Wait. He told me he was waiting for his favorite banana to come."

I don't even try to hold back the laughter that bursts out of me. *Thanks, Gramps*. "Well, I happen to be his Banana Anna. What's your name?"

Her expression relaxes. "Chloe." Then she giggles. "Sometimes he calls me Chlo, 'cause it rhymes with Joe."

I toss the dandelion at her. “Can I call you Snowy Chloe?” I ask, taking a cue from her nearly white hair.

She doubles over, laughter rippling through her little shoulders. I love making kids laugh, especially since most of the kids I work with have no idea what their sweet laughter sounds like. Her giggle-fit seems to have made her forget my question, so I drop it for now. “I gotta find Gramps’ key and start bringing my things in,” I say, turning back to the flower bed and the faux rocks I’ve yet to check. “Do you know which rock it is?”

“Oh!” she exclaims. “It’s at our house. We borrowed it yesterday to bring in some groceries while Grandpa Joe was taking a nap.”

Ah. “Could you go-”

“I’ll go grab it!” Chloe announces. In a whirl, she spins around and dashes down the walkway to the sidewalk, disappearing past the hedge between Gramps’ yard and the neighbor’s. I assume she lives close by. Shrugging, I get to my feet and wander back to my car to start unloading a few things from the backseat while I wait for Miss Effervescent to return.

My two suitcases and three boxes of toiletries are on the grass when I hear the pitter patter of little feet. Chloe is back, but she’s not alone. Another girl, a couple years older, is following. She’s a slightly larger version of Chloe, though her hair isn’t quite as platinum, meaning they’re likely sisters, but the elder is scowling something fierce.

“This is Becca,” Chloe says, her earlier enthusiasm somewhat deflated. “She wouldn’t let me give Grandpa Joe’s key to a stranger, so she came over too.”

Probably wise, and by the looks of the stink-eye I’m getting from Becca, gaining her trust won’t be a simple feat. I could show her my driver’s license, but Gramps and I don’t have the same last name, since he’s Mom’s dad.

“Well,” I start, deciding to take a stab at it, feeling a bit awkward trying to convince two adorable rugrats I am who I say I am, “I’m Anna Henderson.

Grandpa Joe is my grandpa. His last name is Westfield.” I gesture to the SUV and trailer behind me. “This is my stuff. I’m moving in to help him. He had a stroke two months ago.” What else can I say? Becca’s eye is still stinky. “His favorite color is yellow. Honey roasted peanuts are his favorite snack. Oh, and he plays chess at the senior center.”

Chloe, at least, is nodding, as if convinced, but not Becca.

“You could’ve learned all that from someone else,” the older girl says, one of her hands fiddling with something. The elusive key, I bet. “We should wait for Grandpa Joe to come home.”

I don’t like how this is going. Waiting wouldn’t kill me, of course, but-

Oh, duh. Feeling like an idiot, I whip out my phone and tap on my photo app, scrolling through a few dozen saved memes, and a couple bad selfies I’ve been meaning to delete, finally finding one of me and Gramps together, taken last Christmas. Grinning, I turn my phone to show Becca. She takes a step closer, inspecting the photo as if she were a detective. After a few seconds of studious silence, she looks up at me.

“Could be photoshopped.”

Hmm. Tough nut to crack. I’m usually terrific with kids, hence my job, but I’m sensing underlying trust issues.

“Ah, come on, Becca,” says Chloe, a slight whine to her tone. “I believe her.”

Becca only shakes her head. “I should go get Alex.” Saying nothing else, she walks back the way she came.

Both my and Chloe’s shoulders sag. “Who’s Alex?” I ask, going back to my car to get the next box.

“Our uncle,” she says, making herself comfortable on top of one of my suitcases, which can’t be all that comfortable. She doesn’t seem to mind. Her words, however, pique my interest, even though I don’t usually make a habit of being nosy.

“You live with your uncle?” I ask, facing her.

She nods, eyes averted. "Next door." She lets out a sigh, one too deep for someone so young. "Mommy and Daddy are in heaven."

Well, that was unexpected. I forcefully swallow the sudden lump in my throat. "I'm sorry they're not here with you. But, I bet they watch over you all the time."

She nods again. "That's what Grandpa Joe says. They're up there with his Jeanie, and Jesus."

Goodness. *Okay, Anna, please don't bawl in front of the little girl.* I kneel next to her, keeping my voice soft. "Heaven is a great place to make lots of new friends. And even though we miss them and they miss us, someday we'll all see each other again."

Her little shoulders rise and then sink. "But what if they don't remember me? I was only three."

Nope. Not gonna cry. We need a distraction. "Do you have a favorite flower?"

Her gaze lifts to meet mine. "I like roses. Pink ones."

"Oh, yes, those are lovely," I say. "Whenever you see a pink rose, that means your mommy and daddy are thinking about you. It's kind of like they're here with you. And even if you don't see one, there's one blooming somewhere in the world."

"So...they're always thinking about me?" she asks timidly.

It's all I can do to not squeeze her in a super hug. I settle for a pat on the head. "You got it. Now, I like daisies and daffodils. Yellow ones."

A small smile appears. "Cause yellow is your favorite color, just like Grandpa Joe's?"

"Yep." I nod toward the house. "It looks like a bumblebee, doesn't it?" That gets a laugh from Chloe, the sweet sound ringing like a bell. "What color is your house?"

She wrinkles her nose. "Brown."

"Like chocolate cake?"

Brightness returns to her blue eyes. "I love chocolate cake!"

I'm about to suggest we make one sometime, when a low, gruff voice calls out-

"Chloe, what have I said about talking to strangers?"

I jump to my feet, eyes darting upward to take in the tall, broad man standing a few feet away.

Oh.

My.

Goodness.

He's like a tree. A gorgeous, slightly scruffy, scowling tree. Maybe that's where Becca gets it from... This must be Uncle Handsome. I mean, Alex. Locating my wits somewhere in the jumbles of my brain, which is in no particular hurry to move on from simply staring at him, I stick out my hand.

"Hi. You must be Uncle Alex. I'm Anna Henderson. Gramps is my grandpa. I just need the key." Okay, maybe my wits are still lost in there, never to be seen again. I'm not drooling, am I? My hand is still outstretched. I slowly lower it as heat crawls up my neck. I must look, and sound, like an idiot. Mayday. SOS. Is there a faux rock somewhere big enough for me to crawl inside and hide for the rest of my life?

He blinks at me, then casts a frown at Becca, as if wanting to chastise her. I have a suspicion she might have neglected to mention a few details about the person he was coming out to meet. His expression gradually relaxes. "Joe was expecting you to be here tomorrow." His gaze shifts to the SUV and trailer. "I was planning to help bring your stuff inside." He rubs at the back of his neck. "I still can, of course." Turning to Becca, he says, "Go unlock the house for us, will you, Becca?"

The older girl's eyes flick to me, not bothering to hide a glare, and then she stomps up the walkway to the porch.

"Sorry about that," Alex says, watching his niece. "She's..."

“A peach?” I finish, my sarcasm just as ripe, and then immediately regret it. I barely know the girl. “I’m sure she’s great, once she warms up to people.”

He lets out a sigh, sounding much like the one Chloe released not minutes before. I detect frustration. Grief. Something deep. All understandable given the loss they’ve experienced. “I wish it was only that,” he mutters, then clears his throat. “If you’ll open the trailer, I can start getting the heavier things.”

The next hour is spent going back and forth from the trailer to the house. Chloe keeps up a bright bit of chatter, sharing whatever comes to her sweet little noggin, though the rest of us—aside from Becca, who merely frowns—say little, only asking and responding to questions about where things need to go. That doesn’t stop me from sneaking peeks at Alex whenever the opportunity presents itself. And the opportunities I invent just for the pleasure of seeing the mighty flexing of his arms each time he lifts something. It’s quite a sight. So far, I don’t think he’s noticed my observation. Let’s hope it stays that way.

I can tell he’s older than me, probably early thirties compared to my twenty-three. There’s a bit of gray at his temples, mixing well with his dark hair. His tall frame is well built, muscular, impressively capable, though I detect a slight limp as time goes on, one I’m sure wasn’t there before. An old injury? One that creeps up gradually? I wonder about it, but don’t dare ask. I’m not a *complete* fool, though he may already think otherwise.

Soon Gramps’ living room is full of boxes, bins, and bags, while the few pieces of furniture I brought are in my new room—bee and butterfly motif intact—thanks to Alex and his muscles. I really should stop admiring them. “Thanks for the help,” I say, glancing around at the chaos, not looking forward to the unpacking. “Can I get you something to drink? I’m sure Gramps has soda or lemonade in the fridge.” I start toward the kitchen when I hear the words I’ve been waiting for.

“Is that my Banana Anna?”

CHAPTER TWO

Alex

Every time Joe mentioned his granddaughter, he called her that. Banana Anna. The man likes coming up with nicknames for just about everyone. Becca is Beckaroo, which *sometimes* gets a smile from her, and Chloe is Chlo-Jo. It's endearing. The one he gave me is...tolerable. He only uses it when he's teasing me; so pretty much all the time.

Joe talks about his family a lot and, to be honest, I sometimes tune him out when he gets going—sorry Joe!—but I vaguely recall some of the things he's said about Anna. I'm pretty sure her work involves sign language. And she likes the outdoors. Did he ever mention how beautiful she is? Did I somehow miss seeing pictures of her during my visits over here? Regardless, whatever Joe might've shared about Anna's appearance, it clearly hadn't done her justice. Hazel eyes, soft waves of strawberry-blond hair, a heart-shaped face, curves that...I should not be noticing. Because she's young. Too young. And I'm not a creep.

Joe and Anna embrace, the former letting his cane fall to the floor, which I covertly retrieve and lean against the bookcase nearby. Not wanting to intrude on their special moment, I scan the room for the girls. Becca is on the porch. She must have slipped out when Joe arrived. Not seeing Chloe, I head down the hall, loud-whispering her name. It's not unusual for her to wander around Joe's house like she lives there herself. With all the time she spends here, maybe I should have him start charging her rent. I raise my voice a bit more as I move farther from the living room.

"I'm in here!" she calls out.

That helps a bit. I track her down in the game room, across from the room where I placed Anna's furniture. My eyes glance inside briefly, not that

there's anything to see, though just knowing that's where she'll soon be sleeping...

Seriously, dude. Stop.

I turn sharply to the left and enter the game room. Chloe is sitting criss-cross-apple-sauce on the floor (she taught me that one after she started kindergarten a month and a half ago) with a checker board and all the black and red pieces scattered in front of her. She looks up at me with a big grin.

"Wanna play?"

I'd love to. Really. "Not right now, Buddy. We need to head back home. I know you and Becca have some homework to finish before dinnertime."

Her lips purse and her eyes do that squinty thing they do to warn me she's considering a tantrum. Luckily, hers are generally mild. "Can't we do it here, and then eat dinner with Grandpa Joe and Anna?" she asks, the whine in her tone not fully developed yet. "He'll let us."

I almost snort. Joe would let my girls get away with murder. He is so wrapped around their little fingers, he wouldn't hesitate to let them do their homework here—and likely whisper the correct answers to them—play games, blow bubbles, jump on the furniture, and eat their weight in cookies. He's a great guy, even if he wants to fill my girls with sugar.

In the three years we've been neighbors, Joe has invited us over for a meal at least once a week, and sometimes as many as four. I wasn't too receptive at first. Becoming a parent—a single parent, at that—was a real struggle those first several months. Still is, honestly. Especially with Becca. I can't seem to figure out how to get that girl to open up. She's so angry. I know she misses her parents. I miss them too. We've tried different therapists who specialize in children's grief, but nothing seems to be working. Right now, she goes to school—thankfully, she's a pretty good student overall—and then she comes home. And exists. With attitude. I've asked numerous times if there's some hobby she'd like to try, or a sport, or friends she'd like to invite over, but her answer is always no. I'm nearing the

point where I want to stop trying. But I can't. I can't let her down. I just wish I knew how to prevent more disappointments from causing further damage to her young life. I can be grateful, however, that at least Chloe seems to be a happy child. She's probably too young to remember her parents all that much, though I try to talk about them as much as possible. I owe all four of them that. "Grandpa Joe and Anna haven't seen each other in a while, so we need to let them hang out together. Come on."

I've been trying a new technique where I give an expectation and then walk away, with the idea of letting the kid think about it and make a choice. So far, it's worked pretty well with Chloe. With Becca...

I return to the hallway, but don't go far. After less than a minute, I hear the sounds of checker pieces dropping into a box. She's cleaning up. I exhale slowly and move farther away. Another minute and she joins me. She doesn't look thrilled, but at least she obeyed. And no tantrum.

Success!

We enter the living room.

"Thanks for helping my girl," Joe says, clapping me on the back. "I'll walk you out."

I glance over at Anna, who gives me a bright smile, one that squeezes my chest in a way I don't want to dwell on. But I can't help but fixate on something else. Are her lips naturally that pink and shimmery? Is shimmery even a word? Must be lipstick. Or lipgloss. I have no idea the difference between the two. Either way, it makes her mouth impossible not to notice. I really need to stop noticing.

I. Am. Not. A. Creep.

Nevertheless, it might be prudent to limit my interactions with her. No need to worry about the reasons. Plenty of neighbors only greet each other in passing. Anna and I can be passing neighbors. A simple wave and a smile. A shimmery smile...

My gaze shifts to the space between her eyes and nowhere else. Giving a polite nod, I force my feet to take me out the door, with Chloe skipping ahead. She and Becca start toward our house. As I step off the porch, I feel a tap on my shoulder, knowing it's Joe's cane. I turn.

"You and the girls should come over for dinner tomorrow," Joe says, his slightly lopsided grin making me nervous for some reason. What's the old man plotting?

I swallow hard, trying to push down the urge to enthusiastically accept whatever scheme might be in his head, including dinner tomorrow. "You and Anna should spend the next few days together. You know, family time."

Joe jabs the end of his cane into my chest. "You are family, Al My Pal."

Ah. There's the nickname. I'm glad Anna isn't outside to hear it, though it's only a matter of time before she does. Why couldn't it be something more manly? I also hope she didn't notice my limp. I doubt it, though. My leg has been aching more lately. I need to get back to daily stretches. I'm not ashamed of the injury that ended my service as a Marine, per se, it just leads to questions I'd rather not answer. The battlefield is not a place I like to revisit.

I open my mouth to politely refuse Joe's possibly scheming invitation. There are so many reasons to, namely wanting to stick to a limited Banana Anna diet, but I know it won't do much good. I've been in similar arguments with Joe before, and he always wins. I just hope he's not trying to hatch any matchmaking plans. Surely he knows I'm at least ten years older than his lovely granddaughter. "What should we bring?" I ask resignedly.

Joe's grin widens, as much as it's able. "How about some of those smoky beans you brought to the church social last month?"

I nod. "Five o'clock?"

"On the dot."

With a two-finger salute goodbye, I head home, my left leg aching even more. To distract myself from the discomfort, I give my brain an early pep-talk in preparation for tomorrow.

Don't stare at the pretty girl. She's not for you.