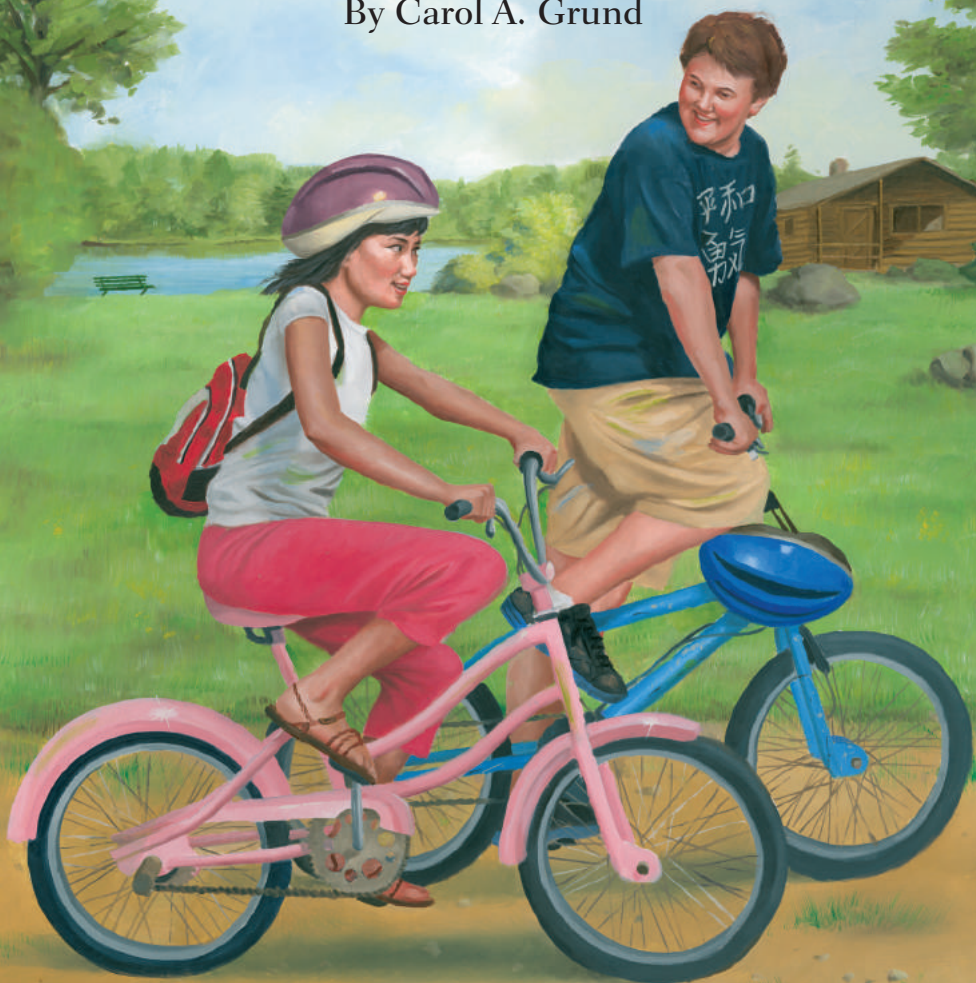


Anna Mei

Escape Artist

By Carol A. Grund





Best Yearbook Ever

For possibly the first time in her life, Anna Mei Anderson was glad her last name started with an A.

A box filled with Elmwood Elementary School yearbooks had just been delivered to Room 117, and Ms. Wagner was planning to hand them out in alphabetical order. Anna Mei could hardly sit still—it would be the first time she'd seen one finished.

“But before I start,” Ms. Wagner announced, “I want to recognize those of you who were on the yearbook staff—Michael, Elizabeth, Anna Mei, and Danny. Mr. Vogel told me how much he appreciated all of your hard work and leadership.”

Anna Mei glanced over at the desk next to hers and found Danny—as usual—with his sketchbook open and a pencil in his hand.

“Pay attention,” she whispered to him. “Ms. Wagner thinks you did something right for a change!”

He lifted his eyebrow in an innocent *who-me?* kind of way but kept right on drawing.

Ms. Wagner pulled a yearbook from the box and called out the first name on her homeroom list: “Anna Mei.” She smiled as Anna Mei walked to the front of the room, a smile that reached all the way to her warm, blue eyes. “I’m so glad you joined our class this year,” she said. “It’s been a true pleasure getting to know you.”

Anna Mei felt a rush of gratitude toward her homeroom teacher, one of the first people she’d met at Elmwood last fall. She’d been pretty terrified back then, standing in front of all those kids she didn’t know. Ms. Wagner had been kind to her from the beginning.

“Thank you,” she said, taking the yearbook and returning the smile. “I hope you’ll sign it for me.”

“I’d be happy to,” Ms. Wagner agreed. “Be sure to bring it to the graduation party.”

Before sliding into her seat, Anna Mei couldn’t resist leaning over to see what Danny was working on. Unbelievable. In just those few minutes he’d managed to sketch two cartoon characters—a girl with straight, dark hair that just reached her shoulders, and a boy with freckles and a big grin. Both appeared to be hovering in the air, capes billowing out behind them.

Their arms were raised in a gesture of victory. Under the picture Danny had scrawled the words, *Yearbook Superheroes*.

Anna Mei had to look away quickly to keep from laughing out loud.

When she'd first come to Elmwood, she hated being the new kid. And she especially hated Danny Gallagher's sketches of her. She was sure that he was picking on her for some reason.

Eventually she figured out that Danny was really just a friendly guy who loves cartoons, food, and corny jokes, not necessarily in that order. Now she couldn't imagine school without him. In fact, she was the one who convinced him to join the yearbook staff with her, and now his playful sketches of life at Elmwood Elementary danced along the margins of almost every page. She and Danny may not be superheroes, exactly, but they sure made a pretty good team.



The new yearbook turned out to be the hot topic all day long, especially at lunch.

As usual, Anna Mei and Danny were sitting with Zandra Caine and Luis Hernandez. Danny once joked that their table would fit right in at the United Nations. During their heritage projects last fall, Zandra had talked about her African ancestors, while Luis's presentation was about Mexico. Anna

Mei, who'd been adopted by the Andersons as a baby, was born in China.

"Then there's me," Danny said, grinning, "the token Irishman."

Now Zandra was trying to flip through the yearbook with one hand while holding a sandwich in the other. "Really, I think it's the best one we've ever had," she said. "You guys did a great job."

Danny was already devouring the school lunch he'd bought—fish sticks with mac and cheese. "You're just saying that so we'll keep letting you sit with us," he said. "Which will definitely work, by the way. You may stay."

Zandra laughed. "That's so generous of you, Danny," she said, "considering we only have two days left in the whole year."

"Maybe he's already planning to rule the seventh grade lunch table, too," Luis suggested.

"Seventh grade!" Danny moaned. "Mind if I enjoy the summer a little bit before I have to think about that?"

"I know *I'm* going to," Zandra said. "And I'm really excited that you're coming to volleyball camp this year, Anna Mei. It's going to be a blast!"

"I can't wait," Anna Mei agreed. "I have so many ideas about what to do this summer that I decided to make a list."

"Only *you* would try to organize summer," Danny

told her with a big sigh, peeling the top off his container of applesauce.

But before Anna Mei could come up with a good comeback, Zandra suddenly stopped turning pages and said, “Hey, look at this!”

The three others crowded in closer to see.

Zandra was pointing at part of a collage with the title “Fall Follies” at the top. The picture was pretty small and a little blurry, but it was still easy to recognize the four girls standing in the gym, all dressed as cowgirls: Zoey, Rachel, Amber, and—

“Anna Mei!” Danny yelled.