

## The Escapists

It was on a cold, clear morning near the end of September, that Anne Browning first thought of climbing to the roof of the school. It was, at the outset, such a ridiculous idea that it almost made her laugh out loud. Instead, she tucked it away in the back of her mind just in case there might be something to it.

The school in question was the Walter Headron Military Academy. Although red brick on the outside, on the inside the school had been painted a bright white. There were dormitories where students slept anywhere from one to three to a room. The W.H.M.A. was a boarding school and, although no one spoke of such things, it was common knowledge that if the school had had a motto, it would have been either “once in, never out,” or “Some things are better left unsaid.”

All the bright-white rooms and hallways were lit with electric lights. This was because the school had only a few windows, which were set high in the walls and let in very little light. What the W.H.M.A. lacked in windows, it made up for in rules. The school was built on them.

At the very center of it all, there were only three simple, unspoken, rules. These were: do not make friends, do not look out of the windows, and most importantly *do not break the rules*. However, the Escapists were set on breaking all three. Always skipping class, breaking rules, and getting in trouble, the Escapists hung out in groups and laughed and talked (even if only in whispers). Anne, like most of the other students, had avoided them at first. No-one wanted to be associated with a group of rule-breakers. No, it was much better to go by the rules and avoid getting *punished*.

It was in her third week at the school, when she was sick of not being able to see the sky, that Anne had finally given in. That was the day she had snuck out of class and followed the other Escapists into a mattress store-room. They had piled mattresses against one of the walls and, scrambling up them, had finally reached a window high in the wall and looked out. Anne had caught only a glimpse of the blue sky, green grass, and red brick outside before they had had to run back to class, but it had been enough. After that Anne was a firm member of the group. She soon discovered that the danger of being caught and *punished* added a certain excitement to any mission. Besides, the glimpses of the outside world that she managed to steal were worth the risk.

Like all of the Escapists, Anne had started out as a Watcher. When they went on a mission, she would stand in the doorway and look out at the hall. If there were any teachers or non-escapist students coming, Anne alerted the others. With sharp hearing, and excellent eyesight, Anne had made a very good Watcher. Watcher was an important job, but it was usually given to the newer, lower-level, Escapists, because being Watcher on a mission meant that you didn't get to look out the window. Anne seemed to be a natural-born Escapist, quickly mastering the basic skills needed to succeed on missions. So before Anne had been an Escapist for very long, she began moving up in their inner-hierarchy. First she became a Part-time Watcher, then a Scout (looking for rooms that had accessible windows), then at last a full-fledged Escapist. Being a full Escapist meant that she still acted as a Watcher or a Scout sometimes, because it was only fair, but that normally she was one of the ones who piled up the mattresses or pillows, and looked out the window. That was on a group mission, the most common kind. Being a full Escapist, though, also meant that she was allowed to go on solo missions.

A solo mission was, in one way, easier than a group mission, because you were less likely to get caught just going down the hall. After that, however, everything about it was harder. First there was the fact that mattresses and pillows were easier to pile up with a group of people helping you. Then, more importantly, there was the fact that, on a solo mission, there was no Watcher. You were alone and, with no warning about teachers coming, you were more likely to get caught. Solo missions had one benefit, though, that outweighed all the cost: if you went alone, you didn't have to take turns at the window. Which meant that, if you went on a solo mission, you could get a real *look* at the world outside, instead of just a glimpse. If you didn't get caught.

Going on a solo mission was something that only the older, braver, Escapists did. It was what every Escapist aspired to: to become independent, able to go on solo missions and never get caught, even (though this was the part that no-one dared even to whisper), maybe even to *escape from the school entirely*. That was the Escapist dream, and Anne felt the great honor residing in the fact that she was at last allowed to go on solo missions.

It was, coincidentally, on her very first solo mission; that cold, clear morning near the end of September, that Anne came up with her idea. Looking out the window of an empty classroom, she caught a glimpse of the other side of the building. Anne shifted her balance to get a better look, slipped, and fell off the pile of pillows she had been standing on. She landed on the floor, scattered pillows laid all around her. Before she fell, though, she saw something. There was a ladder attached to the outside wall. It led from one of the windows, probably a janitor's room, to the roof of the school.

The day Anne saw the ladder was not only her first solo mission, but the first time she was caught. One of the teachers, seeing her from the hallway, dragged Anne off to be

*punished*. The first part of the *punishment* was the worst. Anne was taken to a special room, just for *punishment*. They shut the door, and suddenly she was alone in the room with the Head of the School. Then...she couldn't remember exactly what happened next, but it was the part that gave her nightmares for months afterwards, and made her say the word *punishment* with a sense of fear.

The other part of the *punishment* was that Anne was relocated. She was moved to a different dormitory; and for awhile she had classes alone, under close supervision. It wasn't fun, but it gave her time to think.

The worst part about the isolation was that she couldn't see her best friend, and fellow Escapist, Abby Lainard. The two girls had become friends soon after Anne joined the Escapists, and had gone on several missions together. Abby was half a year younger than Anne, but she was a more experienced Escapist, having been at the school for almost two years.

One of the things Anne thought about during her isolation, way in the back of her mind, was the roof climbing idea. Somewhere in her head, she put her plan together. Then, in mid-October, when she had been back in regular classes for a couple of weeks and had been trying to stay out of trouble, Anne was presented with a marvelous opportunity to put her plan in action.

It began with the fact that some school board inspectors were coming to see the school. Inspections happened every four months, and all the students had to stand in orderly rows in the front hall and answer questions. Sometimes they were questions about the school, sometimes about topics that they were supposed to be studying. None of the questions, however, were about making friends or looking out of windows. Thus,

for all its meticulous inspections, the school board remained oblivious to the activities of the W. H. M. A. In fact, they thought of the school as one of the best. All the students had very high grade-point averages, and not one of them ever failed any of the standardized tests. Since there were so many students at the school, it would be easy to slip away without being immediately noticed. Also, since everyone would be in the front hall, once Anne managed to get away she would have the whole school to herself. It was a golden opportunity, and one that Anne didn't plan to miss.

So far her idea had been a secret. However, Anne needed help to carry out her plan. So, she finally decided to tell Abby about her idea. Abby had gone on several solo missions, and was a devoted Escapist. Besides, she was Anne's best friend. Anne was sure that if anyone could help her with her mission, it would be Abby. During art class, the two girls sat beside each other.

"Abby," Anne whispered, bending over to pick up an oil pastel that had fallen under the table, "I'm going on a top-class, secret, solo mission today."

Abby's blue eyes widened as she took the oil pastel from Anne. "What are you going to do?" she asked.

"When I was on my last solo mission," Anne said slowly, "I saw a ladder leading from one of the janitor's rooms to the roof of the school."

Abby let out a low whistle. "You're going to escape." It was a statement, not a question. They were both Escapists. Freedom and escape were at the top of their priority lists.

Anne half nodded, eyes on her paper. "Maybe," she said, "but I'll need your help to get out of here."

Abby hesitated. If Anne managed to escape, she wouldn't have a best friend anymore. And if Anne got caught... "It'll be risky Anne," she said softly. "You don't even know what you're going to do once you get to the roof, do you?"

Anne shook her head, half wishing that she hadn't decided to tell Abby after all. She was beginning to have second thoughts about the whole mission.

"I know enough to figure out a plan," Anne said, hoping that this was true, "Besides, I can't just give up a chance this big," she said, as much to herself as to Abby.

Anne looked Abby in the eyes. "Remember the Escapist secret motto?" she asked. "No mission for freedom..."

"...is truly impossible," Abby finished. She was determined now. Abby knew that, in Anne's place, she would have been doing the exact same thing. She wasn't going to keep her friend from achieving the dream they all had lived with for so long: becoming free.

"I'll help you get out," Abby whispered, "you can count on me."

When the class lined up to go to the front hall, Anne grabbed an orange oil pastel and lined up too, giving Abby the thumbs-up. The class counted off, and everyone said their number. Then, as they walked down the hall, Anne slipped out of the line. She ducked into the bathroom and hid in a stall. Anne waited, listening to all the footsteps going past, until she was sure everyone was in the front hall. At last everyone was gone. Anne crept out of the bathroom and scurried down the hallway, looking for the janitor's room and watching out for anyone who might still be going to the front hall. Once she hid in a closet, heart pounding, to avoid a teacher with some straggling students going down. Then, the head of the school came unexpectedly around the corner. Anne ducked

into a storage-room, holding her breath and praying that she hadn't been seen. It was a close call, but the Head kept walking, and at last Anne took a deep breath of air and came out. It was some time before she stopped shaking.

In the front hall, the students were again counting off.

"113," Abby said when they reached her number, then "114," for Anne as well.

The teacher smiled. Everyone had gotten down to the front hall safely, then, and none of the trouble-makers had tried to sneak off.

Anne tried several janitor's rooms and closets before she found the right one. Some of them were locked and, for a moment, she thought that the right one was locked as well. She wrestled frantically with the door-knob until the door opened. Finally, Anne let the door close behind her with a sigh of relief. Going over to the window, she looked down. She was on the third story and already the ground seemed far away. Still, this was her chance and she wasn't about to let it slip away. Anne opened the window, and leaned out.

*Don't look down, don't look down,* Anne said to herself, as she grabbed the ladder and began to climb. Finally she reached the top of the ladder. Pulling herself up, Anne stood at last on the flat surface of the roof. Looking down from the roof of the school, everything that had seemed big before looked small and far away. She was surrounded by sky. She was outside and above the school and its rules at last. Anne no longer felt afraid. She laughed and twirled around in a circle, dangerously close to the edge but she didn't care. She was safe, free at last. Nothing could hurt her now. Anne looked around again, noticing a fire escape farther down on the side of the building. If she climbed down the downspout for a bit, she could get to the fire escape and go down the rest of the

way.

In the front hall, Abby crossed her fingers, hoping Anne's mission was going well. *She has to make it, Abby thought, she just has too.* Tears welled up in her eyes at the thought of losing her best friend. "Good-bye Anne," she whispered.

Anne started towards the downspout, then stopped suddenly as a thought struck her. *If she ran away from the school, where would she go?* Anne laughed. *To her parents, of course!* She thought. *She would go back home.* Anne started walking again, then stopped, struck by another thought. *Where was home?* She tried to remember, but all she could come up with was a memory of the apartment building she had lived in with her aunt and uncle after... *After what?* It had something to do with her parents, and then there had been a fire- or had there? She was suddenly so confused. It was all the school's fault. They made you forget about the outside. They made it so you didn't remember. *She couldn't remember!* Desperately Anne tried to remember. The fire, there was something about a fire- and then she remembered. Her parents had died in a fire a year ago. After that, she had lived with her aunt and uncle until...she couldn't remember. They must have taken her here then, her aunt and uncle. *She didn't have a home.*

Anne stood on the roof, suddenly feeling alone and sad. *She could still run away, but she really didn't have anywhere to go.* Then, Anne realized she did have a home, of sorts. The Escapists were her friends, her family. She thought of Abby, and realized suddenly how much she would miss her if she left. Her home was here now, at the school she had hated for so long. She had spent so much time trying to be free, trying to escape, but now she realized that everything she wanted she already had. Joining the

Escapists, going on missions, climbing to the roof; it was all a way of proving she was free. She had needed to prove to herself that she could do it. Now, she knew that freedom was within her, in the choices she made; proving herself didn't matter anymore. She could escape if she wanted to, or she could go back and no one but Abby would ever know. *It was her choice. She was free to choose.* She could run away and find a new home, or she could stay and make her home here. Either way, she would still be free.

Anne took several steps towards the downspout, the fire escape, a new life. Then she stopped, and turned around. Backing away from the edge slightly, Anne crouched down on the surface of the roof. Taking out the oil pastel, she began to write. When she had finished, she stepped back to admire her handiwork. Looking down from the roof, she had a sudden desire to throw something. Impulsively she flung the pastel away from the school, watching it fall, out and down until it came to rest, finally, on the ground below. Then Anne walked back across the roof, climbed slowly down the ladder into the school, and went down to stand with her class in the front hall.

No one except Abby knew that she had ever left, and Anne settled quickly back into her former routine. She told Abby; of course, all about the whole thing. Although she would never say so, Abby never fully understood why Anne would give up her chance for freedom, just to be with her friends. Still, she respected Anne for this, more than for anything else.

Anne never told anyone else about her adventure. Indeed, the whole incident might never have happened at all if it were not for two things. One: ever since that day Anne has been more confident, and she has never again tried to escape. She knows, deep inside herself, that she is free, and Abby stands a little in awe of her for this. Even Anne

has forgotten about the second sign by now. Or, if she remembers, she never mentions it.

Still, somewhere on the roof of the W.H.M.A., these words are written in orange pastel,

as an encouragement and a challenge to any Escapist who may someday find them: **W.**

**H. M. A. Escapist 2<sup>nd</sup> Solo Mission. No Mission for freedom**

**is truly impossible.** And below that, in smaller letters, the words: **Freedom**

**is inside you. A. B.**