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Chapter One

Annie and Drew Meet Mr. Pipes

“Now then, now then,” came the Cabby’s voice.
“I think the best thing we could do to pass the
time would be to sing a ’ymn.” And he did.
He had a fine voice and the children joined in.

C. S. Lewis

Drew shuffled along the stone sidewalk following his sister down High Street. He adjusted the volume on his compact disc player hooked on the pocket of his jeans, then pressed the headphones tightly to his ears. Looking like a pigeon strutting for crumbs, he bobbed his head up and down with the rhythm.

“Only you—oo—oo—oo ...” sang Drew, out of tune, his face twisted with emotion. Annie, his sister, rolled her eyes in disgust and embarrassment.

“Please, Drew, you sound like a sick cow,” she said.

Drew cranked the volume higher. As long as he had his tunes maybe he could endure a summer in this dumpy old English town—he looked at the ancient stone buildings crowding the narrow street—*maybe*.

“Will you please stop that ridiculous singing?” shouted Annie.

“You love me, and I love you—oo—oo—oo,” he sang on louder still.

Annie turned in exasperation and stopped at the curb, looking left down Market Street.

A tall man wearing a camel-colored suit and carrying a leather bag overtook them at the intersection and stopped next to Annie. Thrusting out his chin, he narrowed his eyes looking sideways back at Drew. With a “Humph!” he turned, looking to the right, and waited, while at the same moment Annie, still looking left, stepped off the curb into the cobbled street.

Suddenly, amidst screeching brakes and a blaring horn, Annie felt a strong hand gripping her arm. "I say, my dear, do watch out!" the man cried, pulling her to safety.

A gray and black Morris wheezed past the startled and now breathless Annie.

"Blighter!" said the tall man, staring after the little car.

"Indeed! A near miss, to be sure," he went on, stroking his mustache. Then turning, he lifted his hat. "Martin Dudley's the name. Are you quite unhurt, my dear?"

"Y-yes, thank you," stammered Annie.

"And whom have I the pleasure of rescuing today?" he went on.

"I'm Annie—Annie Willis. And this is my little brother, Andrew—you can just call him Drew."

"Well, Annie and Drew," he said, "clearly, you are not from our side of the pond. In England you must accustom yourselves to looking right before proceeding across the street. Even the traffic in our little village will expect this of you. I dare say, had you been in London, where motor cars are driven with considerably less care, you would have found yourself in need of my profession."

He then bent at the waist and looked to the right, shielding his eyes with his free hand like a sea captain scanning the horizon for pirates. Still bent over, he glanced back at Annie and Drew and nodded encouragingly. He then straightened and strode into the now quiet street. Turning back, he said, "Do, pray, be careful in the future." Tipping his hat, he disappeared down High Street.

"What a nut," said Drew, pulling his headphones off and running his hand over bristles of blond hair. "But good grief, Annie, you've got to watch where you're going."

"I was!" said Annie, her face flushed. "I looked left, but I forgot they drive on the wrong side of the road. I looked the wrong way—no, the right way—they just drive the wrong way."

"Yeah," said Drew. "And there's another good reason why this is the stupidest place to spend a summer. They can't even drive on the right side of the road here. And look how old everything

is,” he snorted. “And what about breakfast this morning! Who eats fried mushrooms and baked beans for breakfast anyway?”

“The stewed tomatoes,” said Annie with a grimace, “almost did me in; but Mrs. Broadwith is nice—you have to admit that.”

“Maybe, but she talks funny,” said Drew, as they walked aimlessly down the street. “And her house we’ll be staying in sure is old.”

The children’s mother (who will be entirely too busy to take much part in this story) had chosen this place to do her research precisely because it was small, off the beaten path, and old.

But “old” to the children, especially to Drew, meant dull and boring. So the cobbled streets, lined with medieval cottages—some with thatched roofs, and the ancient church, its steeple piercing the summer sky, didn’t look fun at all. Moreover, the rolling green fields stretching beyond the market town and covered with grazing sheep seemed humdrum. Even the old stone bridge bordering the village and crossing the old winding river—where children swam, fished, and sailed—didn’t look very interesting just then. They had no idea new friends and new adventures awaited them at every turn.

All they could think of was the city they left behind—full of new skyscrapers, new and bigger malls, new stadiums for sports and concerts, new theaters, new houses, new freeways, new fast-food restaurants, and all their old friends. By comparison, this looked like a pretty unimpressive place to be stuck—and for a whole summer.

Annie suddenly stopped in front of two steps leading to a green door with a large lion knocker in full roar staring down at them. She read from a brass plate, “Martin L. J. Dudley, Family Surgery.’ It’s *him*. This must be where that guy stopped.”

“Huh?” said Drew over the din of his headphones.

“I said,” shouted Annie. “That guy who helped me must be a doctor—Dr. Dudley.”

“I’m going to need one,” said Drew sniffing the air, “if I don’t get a decent meal. It’s been forever since we had any real food;

BAKEHOUSE



breakfast didn't count, that's for sure. And it's already way after lunch. What I wouldn't do for a Big Mac right now!"

Drew turned off his music and pulled the headphones from his ears. Although it didn't smell like a hamburger drive-in, something sure did smell good.

"Do you smell it?" He pointed across the street at a narrow building wedged between two larger ones. Black and reddish stains streaked the worn, gray stones, and the walls leaned to one side. Drew studied the bulky limestone lintel over the window with "Bakehouse" carved long ago into the stone. Hanging above the oak door, a sign read, "Beccles's Bakehouse, established 1711." "It's a bakery," said Drew. "And I don't care how old it is, I'm starving; let's go see what's cooking."

Annie, cautiously looking right, stopped Drew before he crossed in front of a middle-aged lady, wearing a wool skirt and jacket, riding toward them on her bicycle. With her thumb she rang a little mechanical bell on the handle bar and nodded politely at them as she pedaled closer. In a wicker basket hung between the handlebars rode a sand-colored, pug-nosed dog, one ear turned inside out and his tongue lolling in the breeze. He yapped a greeting as he passed.

"What a nice little pooch," said Annie. "Look, Drew, he's smiling."

Leading the way across the street, Drew followed the bicycle with his eyes. "I've never seen an old lady in a dress riding a bike," he said shaking his head. "And that's the clunkiest excuse for a bike I've ever seen; what a piece of junk! Who'd ride one like that, anyway? Yeah, well, I suppose it fits in an old place like this."



Drew's mouth watered. Through rippling glass panes they saw an array of freshly baked pastries. Feasting their eyes on swirls of cream, flecks of chocolate topping, flaky golden crusts, and shiny red cherries, the children suddenly saw a large woman dressed in white adding a basket of croissants so fresh and steaming a haze crept up the windowpanes. Her full red cheeks, a

smudge of white flour on each, bulged as she smiled. She beckoned at them with a strong, floury hand.

"I'm going in," said Drew.

Annie followed him through the door.

A cheerful bell tinkled as they stepped down over a worn threshold. They entered a long narrow room arranged with a counter, tables and chairs, and filled with the aroma of baking pastries.

The woman bustling to greet them said, "You'll be the two young ones from America, then?" Little clouds of flour puffed from her apron as she dusted off her hands.

"You know about us?" said Annie smiling at the big women.

"Indeed I do," she continued. "This here's just a wee town."

Drew almost snorted. She had that right.

"Mrs. Broadwith and I have known each other for ever so long; she told me you'd be arriving. I'm Mrs. Beccles and absolutely delighted to be making your acquaintance." She studied them for a moment. "But I didn't expect you to be so nearly the same age, you could be twins for the look of you. But what a handsome pair you be."

Drew didn't like people commenting about their appearance, though many did. They both had blond hair, blue eyes and freckles—lots of freckles. Annie's hair grew well past her shoulders and she liked braiding it different ways, right then two braids started at her temples and joined in pigtails down her back. Drew kept his hair short, mostly due to an unwieldy cowlick where his hair met his freckled forehead. Annie was almost a year and a half older, but Drew insisted he'd caught up with her in height.

"Nice to meet you, Mrs. Beccles," said Annie smiling.

There she goes, thought Drew, always "little miss friendly."

"I'm Annie and this is my little brother, Andrew—Drew for short."

Drew's face grew warmer. "Little brother?" he thought, I'm almost a half an inch taller.

“You’ll have a hard time convincing the likes of me,” she said, smiling at Drew and squinting back and forth at the tops of their heads, “that he’s your *little* brother. I’d wager the crown jewels he’s past you up in the height department.”

Drew smiled smugly at Annie and looked past Mrs. Beccles at plates mounded with fresh pastries.

Mrs. Beccles followed his gaze. “I’ve just baked these little meat pies,” she said with a twinkle in her eye. “And I need someone to try them out—see if I got things right this time. Would you be so kind and taste some goodies for me?”

“Anything we can do to help,” said Drew, licking his lips and rubbing his hands together.

Scurrying about, Mrs. Beccles, juggling a flurry of plates filled with good things to eat, sat the children down at a table. Before they knew what she was doing she had gripped each of their hands and with head bowed said, “For what we are about to eat, O Lord, make us truly grateful, Amen.”

After some minutes of gorging himself and with mouth full and eyes roving for more, Drew asked, “Has this place really been around since seventeen something?”

“Oh, indeed it has,” she replied. “My ancestors have baked in these walls for the better part of three hundred years.”

“No kidding?”



Thanking Mrs. Beccles for their lunch and at her insistence, promising to return often, they stepped out into the sunshine with a bag of fresh bread rolls and heard the slow chiming of bells echoing against the stone walls crowding the narrow street.

“Four o’clock,” said Drew. “And all is well.” He smiled, rubbing his full stomach with satisfaction.

As they walked along, a black and white sign with “Church Street,” on it marked a narrower cobbled lane to their left.

“This’ll lead somewhere,” said Annie. “Let’s follow it.”

Drew, headphones in place, punching buttons searching for a favorite song, followed Annie wordlessly.

Limestone houses gave way to a low wall with flowering saxifrage forcing its way between the stones. Annie picked a small handful of the tiny pink flowers and tucked them into her braid.

Church Street wandered past a large, well-kept house reflecting the warm afternoon sunlight. The stone wall to their right was the fence for a small green pasture bordering the backs of houses facing High Street.

A white pony lay on its back, legs and hooves in the air, rolling with abandon from side to side in the lush grass.

“Oh, I’ll bet that feels good,” said Annie smiling and leaning over the wall toward the pony. “Come here, girl,” she coaxed.

The pony rolled over and stood staring at the children as if not at all happy to be interrupted in its rolling. Grass and leaves cluttered its mane.

Annie pulled out a piece of bread and held it toward the pony. Drew, still distracted by his music, looked on, wondering why Annie would be interested in a silly old pony. But as it came closer he pulled his headphones off and joined her leaning over the low stone wall.

“Give me a piece of that,” he said, reaching for the bread.

“Quiet! You’ll scare her away.”

“He’s a him,” said Drew. “You saw him rolling. That’s not lady-like behavior. No, he’s got to be a him.”

Annie, knowing Drew was baiting her for a fight, ignored him.

“Aren’t you a friendly girl?” she said, rubbing the pony on its velvety nose as it munched the bread. Annie pulled a twig out of the coarse white mane. “What’s your name, anyway? I’ll bet you’d let me ride you sometime, wouldn’t you?” She scratched under the pony’s obliging chin.

“You can’t ride a pony that doesn’t belong to you,” said Drew. “And besides, we don’t know whom it *does* belong to, and if we did, I’ll bet they hate kids and wouldn’t let us near him.”

Just then they heard from the church spire, partly hidden from view by a large yew tree, the deep, penetrating sound of bells ringing the half-hour.

“Let’s go check the old church out,” said Drew. “Can’t be much,” he added, “but there’s nothing else to do around here.”



Surrounding the stone church, its spire reaching high into the afternoon sky, spread a large churchyard filled with grave markers. Sunlight bathed most of the yard, but yew and sycamore trees grew in clusters, casting shadows on some of the faded markers.

Passing through the giant gate pillars guarding the churchyard, Annie admired the white clover lining the rough stones of the pathway. The air was alive with the humming of bees busily gathering nectar from the yellows, reds, and whites of cow parsley, cuckoo flower, and willow herb clustered around the stones. Reaching down, she picked an oxeye daisy growing among the untrimmed meadow grass next to a lichen-covered tombstone. Tucking it into her left braid, she sighed, “I like this place.”

Drew studied the massive spire. Rising higher and higher above them, it seemed to lean away at the top. A swallow flew out of the topmost of the four Gothic windows set in the spire. Swooping down and landing on the wing of an angel statue guarding a small iron-fenced plot, the bird twiddled happily.

They walked toward the Gothic-arched doorway near the base of the spire. On either side of the entrance the pointed stone arch came to rest on two gargoyles, their rigid faces stared down menacingly at the children.

“I can’t imagine it,” said Annie. “Hundreds of years ago somebody actually carved these faces . . . and they’re still here. What do you think, Drew, maybe fifty people, chipping away at boulders every day for who knows how many years, made this old church?”

Drew, who liked figuring out how and why things worked, gazed upward, calculating just how many stones a single arch supported, and then he planned to figure approximately how much each one weighed. After that he’d multiply by the number of stones, then by the total number of arches around the whole church. He did not want to be interrupted.