

Annie and Willie escape from their foster home on a snowy night. They walk to a small town with barely enough money for food. Where will they sleep? Can they trust the people they meet? Will they be able to stay together?

The Right Address

By Patricia Gable

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Patricia Gable

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Chapter One

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“Pssst. Willie, wake up,” Annie whispered.

Willie was groggy. He pulled the covers over his head.

“Leave me awone,” he growled.

“Alone,” Annie corrected him, as usual, then shook her head to get back to the point.

“We have to go, Willie. Be very, very quiet. I’ll tell you more later.”

Annie helped Willie into his winter clothes. Jeans, sweatshirt, boots, gloves, knit hat and coat. She added Willie’s shoes to a large black garbage bag, which she had prepared over the last two days. The bag was filled with clothing, shoes, a few books. She put her diary and wallet, with her birthday money in her coat pocket.

She looked around one last time then they tiptoed through the maze of toys and furniture. Nipper, the Warren’s cat, leapt to the back of the sofa and let out a high-pitched meow. A signal that

he wanted to eat. Annie tossed the cat's favorite toy across the room to distract him.

Hearing the squeak of the bedroom door caused the children to freeze in place. Annie held her breath. A toilet flushing and another squeak of the bedroom door and the house was quiet again. Annie, exhaling deeply, slung the bag of clothes and books over her shoulder and took Willie's hand, leading him out of the front door. They had made it this far at least.

Willie was quiet as they trudged through the darkness and the thin layer of snow. They were walking in the opposite direction they took when walking to school. Farther away from the foster home and anyone who might recognize them. Annie could see the town's lights in the distance, which eased her fear.

"I think I'm hungry," Willie whined. "Did we have breakfast?"

"No, we didn't. Here's a granola bar." Annie reached in her coat pocket and handed it to Willie.

"Can I sit down to eat it?"

"No, we need to get to those lights," Annie pointed. "Then we will find a place to sit."

They trudged along silently. After what seemed like an eternity, they reached the little town. Most of the store lights were dimmed. One café was open but barely any cars traveled on the

main street. Annie searched for a safe place to hide, finding one next to Donna's Diner. A dark alley. They sat in the alley behind a large trash can. That should have been a relief to Annie, but a distant siren made her stomach churn. She remembered something her father used to say, "*No matter how bad things seem, they can always get worse.*"

"I wonder if they are looking for us," Annie murmured.

"Who?" Willie asked in a too-loud voice.

"Shh! The Warrens," Annie whispered.

"Are we playing hide and seek?" Willie asked in a softer voice.

"No. We're running away. The Warren's want to separate us, Willie. I heard them arguing again, but this time they were arguing about us. They want me to take care of the baby while they just sit around. They want to send you to a different foster home."

"Was I bad?" Willie's eyes filled with tears.

Annie pulled him closer. "No Willie. You have been very good. But, with the baby, I heard them say they have too much to do and not enough time to take care of us."

The sound of the siren was closer, louder, and Annie put her finger up to her lips so Willie would know to stay quiet. When

the police car parked across the street, Annie motioned to Willie to get under the large piece of damp ragged carpeting laying in the alley. She scrambled under the carpet after him. Then they waited.

Annie, hearing footsteps, pulled Willie closer and covered his mouth with her hand. Could the person behind those footsteps hear her heart pounding?

The policeman kicked the trashcan over, scattering rotten food, soiled rags, cans, bottles and coffee grounds. He pointed his flashlight down the alley.

“There’s nothing in here,” he said.

“Maybe he went to another town,” his partner said. “The one just down the road.”

“Or maybe...just maybe he is still hiding here in this town. We gotta keep looking. Walk these streets and ask folks if they’ve seen him. He’s so ugly he’s hard to miss.”

Relief flowed through Annie. She released her grip on Willie, but they remained under the carpet until they could no longer hear footsteps. The alley remained dark, but the street was bathed with sunlight. Annie decided it was time to move.

She did not notice the man standing in the shadows across the street watching them.

Chapter Two

The children stood in the darkest part of the alley and straightened their clothes, brushed off some dirt and waited. Annie was thinking. What next?

She dragged the scroungy carpet into the darkest corner of the alley and shoved their bag of clothes under it. She checked that her wallet and diary were still in her pocket, took a deep breath, and grabbed Willie's hand.

“Willie, when we walk out of this alley, you have to act like we belong here.”

“Why?” Willie cocked his head.

“So that no one will know that we ran away from the Warrens.”

“Oh. But...”

“Let's see if we can get something to eat.” Annie said. She knew that food would distract Willie.

“Goody!”

The stores and coffee shops were beginning to open up. Employees were turning on lights inside, placing the open signs in the windows and sweeping the dusting of snow off of the sidewalks in front of the entrances. The small town's coziness helped Annie relax a little.

At the end of the main street was a gas station with a small store inside.

"Let's get something in there," Annie pointed to the store. "Stay quiet, Willie."

"Can I have a donut?" Willie asked and Annie responded with a squinted glare at him.

They collected a bottle of juice, an apple and a donut each. As Annie paid for the food, the clerk chatted about the weather. Nothing suspicious. The children left the store and found a bench in front of a library.

"Let's have our juice and donut. We can save the apple for later," Annie suggested as they snuggled together to keep warm. Willie's teeth were chattering, and white puffs escaped from his mouth into the cold air.

All the while, Annie was thinking about what to do next, so she didn't notice the man in a black coat standing in the alcove of the library entrance watching them.

“I have an idea!” Annie said, trying to be cheerful. “We can go into the library when it opens.”

“Do I hafta do school stuff?” Willie pouted.

“No, we will look at books, use the bathroom and get warm. The library opened at 9:00am and the children were first in the door. A blast of warm air greeted them. It smelled like old books and fresh coffee. The library was small. As far as Annie could tell, there was only one librarian and one assistant who was shelving some books.

Annie stopped at the librarian’s desk with Willie trailing behind her. She puffed up her chest, trying her best to act as old as she could.

“Hello, my name is Annie McDonald, and this is my brother Willie. We came to town because my grandmother is sick, and my mother is staying with her. She said we could come here to read because we were bored at grandmother’s house. Is it all right if we stay here without Mother? We promise to be quiet.”

The librarian put her glasses on and looked them up and down. “It will be fine if you are well behaved. Any trouble and you will be sent back to your grandmother’s. Understand?”

They both nodded sheepishly.

The children’s section was in the back corner, decorated with posters and primary-colored tables and chairs. There were

baskets of crayons and pencils on each table and papers stacked by the baskets, some with pictures to color and some blank.

“Annie, can I color?” Willie asked.

She pulled off her knit hat and her dark blond hair spilled out. “Yeah, I’m gonna look for a book.”

Annie loved books and found one of her favorites. She returned to the children’s area, laid on the carpeted floor and began to read while Willie was coloring.

A girl, wearing a tattered dress, wandered into the children’s area. She sat in the corner, leaning against the wall with her book. It wasn’t a book for children. Annie noticed the cover, something she had seen before. She wanted to run up to the girl so they could chat about the book. But she knew she couldn’t.

What if the girl asked her name? What if she asked where she lived or where she went to school? Annie decided against it.

Hours passed in the peaceful environment. Willie had fallen asleep with his head on the table.

Annie reached in her pocket for her wallet. It was a beautiful leather wallet that her parents had given her for her eighth birthday five years ago. A tear slid down her cheek as she touched the picture of her family that she kept in the front pocket. It was taken on vacation at the beach. Smiles on their

faces as they stood by a lop-sided sandcastle that the four of them made. Well, Willie was only two years old, so he wasn't much help. She missed them so much. Why did they have to die? Her birthday money was still in the wallet. She never got a chance to spend it. Now it was money for food.

Pulling her diary out of her pocket, Annie settled at one of the children's tables and reached for a pencil from the basket.

Dear Diary: Today I'm in a library. Usually my most favorite place. But I'm scared. Real scared. We ran away from the Warrens.

She closed the diary. Her hands trembled a little, and she closed her eyes, remembering the first time she had written in her diary. It was an ordinary day when her mother came into her room, sat on the edge of Annie's bed, and handed her a small, wrapped package.

"What's this? It's not my birthday," Annie asked, holding the package.

"No reason, really," Mother replied. "But I have been reading some of your schoolwork and realized that you are not only a good reader but a good writer, too. I thought it would be fun for you to have a place to express your feelings. Private feelings. Good or bad. Funny or sad. The only thing I ask is that you try to write in it every day. Even if it is just one sentence."

She remembered her response. “I promise I will, Mom.”

Annie, trying to avoid a gush of tears, got up to use the restroom. As she was returning to the children’s area, she caught a glimpse of someone looking through the window. A man. He was tall with dark hair and a grey cap. Was he looking for them? She reflexively ducked her head down as she walked. When she looked up again, he was gone. Did she imagine it?

Chapter Three

Annie and Willie left the library before dark. They stopped at the only fast-food place in town and ordered sandwiches and hot chocolate. It was crowded so no one paid attention to the two runaway children.

Then Annie saw two policemen walking toward the restaurant. It felt like her heart stopped beating. She took Willie's hand and walked over to a group of people who were waiting in line. Their backs were to the policemen. She pushed closer to the group so they could blend in.

"Excuse me," a male voice said from behind them.

Annie held her breath.

"Excuse me, can you hand me some packets of ketchup, please?" the voice asked.

Annie grabbed some of the packets on the counter, and when she turned around, she was face-to-face with a bearded older man. The policemen were sitting across the room talking. Annie breathed again.

It wasn't a long distance to get to the alley but the two walked slowly, tired from the long day. They talked about some of the stores they passed and stopped to look in the window of a unique toy shop. Willie could have stayed there all night, wishing for one thing or another.

When they finally reached the alley, thankfully, the bag of clothing was still there.

"We need to make some kind of bed," Annie said, dragging the rug they hid under last night.

"That rug is too stinky!" Willie pinched his nose and stuck out his tongue making Annie laugh.

"Look, there's a big piece of cardboard behind the trash can. We can use that. I can't remember seeing that last night," she said.

Annie and Willie dragged the cardboard over to the dark corner. They used all the clothes from their bag as pillows and covers.

"The good thing about the alley is that we don't feel the cold wind," Annie said.

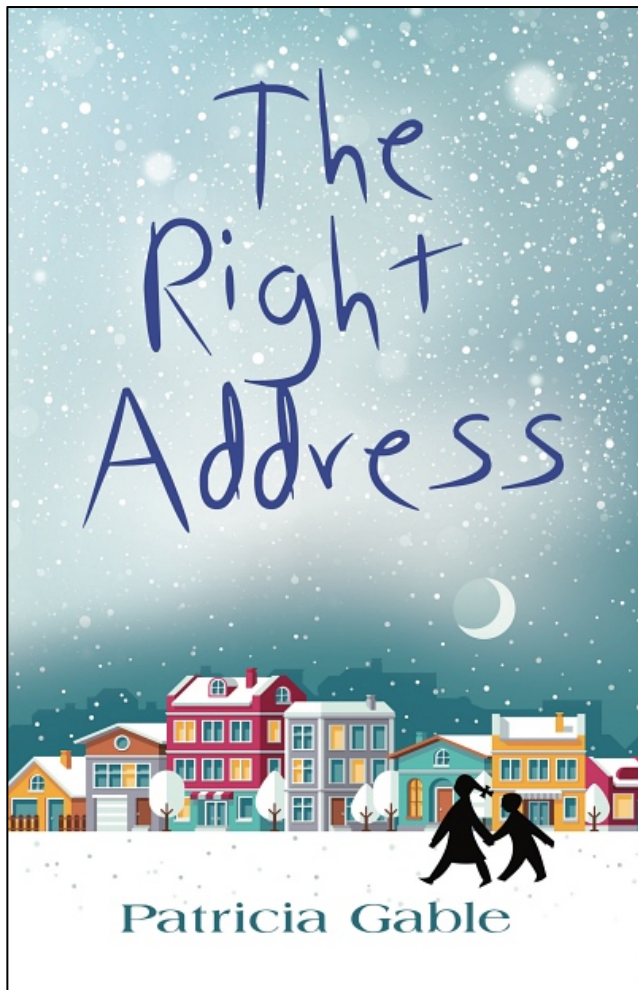
"Tell me a story, Annie. Please," begged Willie.

"I'll tell you the story of Corduroy Bear. He's a stuffed bear with green overalls. He got lost in the laundromat and ended up in the

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washing machine. Lisa, his best friend, was scared when she couldn't find him..."

Soon they were both asleep. And the tall man wearing a black coat watched from across the street, smiling because, as the two children lay sound asleep, the cardboard he left was underneath them.



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