

Chapter 12

The Fire

When they arrived home, Annabelle parked the car in the garage and turned to the two girls.

“How would you two like to come in for a quick visit?” She looked at her watch. “It’s still early, and I can show you some of my doll collection.”

“We promised that we would tell Mom and Dad if we were going to go into someone’s house,” said Kim. The prospect of seeing Annabelle’s large collection of dolls excited her, but she didn’t want to get her or her sister in trouble.

Erin nudged Kim. They had planned to go get the cell phone as soon as they got home, and now it looked as if Kim had forgotten. “Okay,” Erin said quickly, “but we’ve got something really important to do first.”

Making up her mind, she gave Kim ‘the look.’ She had decided that she just couldn’t wait another minute to go get the cell phone to see if they had caught Mr. Smith in the act

of locking them in the boathouse. If they had a clear picture of him in the video, then they would have the proof that they needed.

“Where are you going?” asked Annabelle. They had already started across the lawn toward the hidden gate in the fence.

“We’ll be right back,” Erin called as they reached the gate. Without waiting for an answer, she lifted the latch and the two of them crossed over to their own yard and turned toward the boathouse.

“Do you think your idea worked?” asked Kim as the girls came closer to the edge of the forest.

“I don’t know,” answered Erin, “but I sure hope so. It’s the only proof we’ve got that it was Mr. Smith who locked us in there.”

“But why would he do that?” asked Kim.

“I think he wanted the treasure,” answered Erin. There really was no other reason for him to do it. “He must have heard us talking about treasure and was probably trying to scare us away.”

They continued down the path until they reached the area where they had left the cell phone. “Come on,” said Erin, pushing her way through the underbrush. When they reached the tree where the phone was hidden, they both looked up at the spot where they had put it. The cell phone was still there in the tree and aimed at the boathouse door.

“Give me a hand.”

Erin reached up and started to climb the tree. Kim pushed from behind to give her a boost. When Erin got up to the branch that held the phone, she gave it a quick inspection. The recording light was off, but the battery symbol was red. There was still 5% left. Erin looked down at Kim and gave her a thumbs-up.

Shoving the phone in her pocket, she started to climb back down, but she froze just before she reached the ground. Deep in the woods, a twig snapped. There was definitely something moving toward them, but it was still some distance away and off to their right. Whatever was making the sound was large, and it was getting closer by the second. She could clearly hear the sound of leaves rustling and the crack of twigs being snapped.

“What was that?” whispered Kim. Squinting hard, she desperately tried to see what was making the noise but she couldn’t see anything.

Erin jumped to the ground and grabbed Kim’s hand. “Come on! Let’s get out of here,” she urged, pulling her sister down the path.

Kim started to cry. Erin clamped a hand over her mouth, “Shh...” she hissed.

“I’m scared!” Kim squeaked through her sister’s fingers.

Whatever was making the noise changed directions and was now following them. As Erin ran, she glanced back over her shoulder but she still couldn’t see who or what was following them. The sound was definitely getting closer and she guessed that whoever was following them was going to catch up to them in a matter of seconds.

Pushing Kim ahead of her, she kept herself between Kim and the person chasing them. Just when she thought they were done for, the two girls burst into their backyard and out into the open. The crashing behind them suddenly stopped and everything fell silent.

Erin and Kim paused for a moment, gulping in huge breaths of air. After a moment, they crossed over to the gate toward Annabelle's porch.

"Who was that?" asked Kim. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. The whole incident left her feeling shaky and confused.

"I don't know," answered Erin, "but we won that race." She smiled at Kim trying to make her feel a little better.

Kim sniffed loudly. She was definitely spooked by the whole incident. Reaching up, she knocked on Annabelle's door and waited for a response. It seemed like forever before Annabelle opened the door and let them in. When they were finally inside, Erin reached up and bolted the door behind them.

"My goodness, children! What happened to you?"

Annabelle led the girls into the dining room where she had pulled out some of her dolls for them to see.

"Miss Peterson, do you have a cell phone charger?" Although still shaken up, Erin could barely contain her excitement. Removing the cell phone from her pocket she placed it on the table. "We've got proof that Mr. Smith was

the one who locked us in the boathouse – right here!" She held the phone up for Annabelle to inspect.

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"We made a video of Mr. Smith locking the door to the boathouse earlier today. We were just out there getting this phone from the tree where we hid it."

Annabelle took the phone from Erin and turned it over, inspecting it closely. "I don't have a cell phone charger or whatever you said," she declared, handing the phone back to Erin.

"But I do."

A high-pitched voice rang out from the door of the kitchen. The statement was followed by the same wicked laugh that the girls had heard outside of the boathouse and in the bank.

The three spun around and faced Mr. Smith, standing there with the screwdriver like a knife in his hand. "I'll take that phone," he snarled.

On his face was the same sneer that sent chills down the girls' spines back at the bank.

Annabelle took the phone from Erin and handed it over to Charles. Then she backed away from him, shielding the two small girls behind her with her body.

“You’re the one in the woods!” accused Kim. “That was your scary laugh!”

Without thinking of what she was doing, Kim ran out from behind Annabelle and kicked Mr. Smith hard in the shins. Charles howled and doubled over in pain. He snarled and lifted the screwdriver as if he were going to strike Kim. She quickly backed away but was stopped by the dining room table. Charles towered over her and grabbed her shirt in his fist, picking her up a few inches off the floor.

“I’ve always hated sniffing little brats,” he growled, “and I especially don’t like the ones that don’t respect their elders.”

“Hey!” yelled Erin, “You put my sister down!” She quickly crossed the room and started tugging on Mr. Smith’s coat.

Charles ignored her and let out a vicious laugh. He picked Kim up farther until his face was directly in front of hers. She could feel his hot breath on her skin and the smell was terrible. He lifted the screwdriver as if he was going to hit her with it,

but he stopped when he heard Annabelle’s commanding voice. “Charles! No!”

Rushing over as fast as her legs would take her, Annabelle pulled Kim away from him. “You are despicable,” she said, glaring at him.

The cruel look on Charles’ face was frightening. His mouth was turned up into a cold and vicious smile. “Whatever you say, dear sister,” he growled. “I have something in store for you and these two brats, which will make sure I get what I want.”

With the screwdriver still looming above their heads, Charles forced the three of them to sit down around the table. “Now Annie,” he scowled, “where are the rest of the stocks and bonds? And I need not remind you, that if you don’t cooperate, there is no telling what I will do to one of these brats.”

As he spoke, he waved the screwdriver like a knife from Erin to Kim. His eyes were cold and lifeless.

“There is no need to threaten the children, Charles. They haven’t done you any harm,” said Annabelle. “The rest of the certificates are in a chest under the sink in the kitchen.” A look

of disgust spread over her face. “Take them and get out of here.”

“Don’t tell him!” yelled Erin as soon as Annabelle spoke, but it was already too late.

Charles directed an ugly smile at Erin as he walked around the table. He grabbed her collar and pulled her out of her chair.

“I’m taking this brat with me into the kitchen,” he growled. “So don’t try anything, or it will be your fault when something bad happens to her.”

He pulled Erin into the kitchen and forced her to get the chest out from under the sink. She carried the box back into the dining room and placed it on the table. After a quick inspection of the contents, Charles laughed viciously.

“After all these years, the Peterson fortune finally surfaces,” he said. “My father was right all along. He always believed that John Peterson had hidden the fortune somewhere on this estate.”

He laughed again and closed the chest.

Annabelle rose from her seat. “Why didn’t he tell me?” she asked. “He always said that there was no money and that my father was penniless.”

“You silly, old fool,” snapped Charles. “He never would have told you about the Peterson fortune. With your father dead, he finally controlled the entire town. Daddy only took you in so that if the Peterson fortune were ever discovered, he would be able to claim it all as your guardian.”

“Why would you sell your house to us if you thought there was a fortune hidden there?” asked Erin.

Mr. Smith glared at her. “It was Daddy who believed there was a fortune there, not me. I always thought that these stocks and bonds disappeared along with Annabelle’s father.”

He nodded over at Annabelle as he spoke. “After Daddy died, I saw an opportunity to make some money on the sale of his home. I didn’t even give the Peterson fortune a thought until I heard you girls mention the treasure hidden in the boathouse.”

“When?” demanded Kim.

Charles smiled. “I was out here for a final loan inspection of your property this morning and I overheard the two of you

talking as you were walking through the woods.” He laughed and then added, “It was all quite by accident, I might add, but a very fortunate accident for me.”

“So, it *was* you who locked us in the boathouse!” exclaimed Erin.

“Very good,” answered Smith, quite pleased with himself. “It was only to scare you away until I could come out and search the boathouse tonight. But, as you already know, my plan didn’t work out as I had expected.”

He waved the screwdriver in their direction and ordered them all to stand up.

“What are you going to do to us?” asked Erin. Her voice shook a little with fear.

“Why nothing, little girl,” he smiled.

The smile frightened her even more.

“I just need some time to get back into town and dispose of these certificates.”

As he spoke, he motioned toward the back door of the house. “I’m going to lock you in the boathouse until I get back from town. Then I’ll let you out and you can do whatever you’d like.”

“You’ll never get away with this,” Erin squeaked.

“Of course I will,” answered Smith. “I’m the most important citizen in River’s End. And you won’t be able to prove anything.” He laughed again. “I’ll destroy the cell phone and hide the fortune where nobody will ever find it.”

As he spoke, he led them across the backyard and into the woods. There was a path to the boathouse in the back of Annabelle’s house. He cautioned them to not cry out or he would hurt Annabelle. The two girls remained silent as they walked toward the boathouse door.

Reaching into his pocket, Charles pulled out a key just like Erin’s and opened the padlock.

“How did you get my key?” demanded Erin, reaching down and thrusting her hand into her pocket. She pulled out her key.

“Give me that,” snapped Smith. Taking the key from her, he threw it far out into the river.

“Hey!” yelled Kim. “That was ours!”

“You won’t need it anymore,” laughed Smith. With that, he shoved the three of them into the boathouse and slammed the door shut. They could hear the padlock click into place.

“Charles! Let us out of here this instant!” shouted Annabelle. Looking down, she winked at Erin and Kim. Catching on to what she was doing, they joined in by banging on the door and shouting for help.

Suddenly, from the outside of the building, they heard a cruel laugh and immediately smelled smoke. Through the cracks of the door came a black haze, followed by yellow flames. The whole outside of the boathouse quickly became ablaze, spreading flames rapidly to the sides and roof. The three of them could hear Smith laughing insanely just outside the building.

“Goodbye, sister dear,” he shouted, and then started off toward the woods without looking back.

“Hurry! We have to get to the tunnel entrance,” commanded Annabelle. The flames were spreading, and the smoke inside the boathouse was almost too thick for them to see. The three of them covered their mouths as they started coughing. “Hurry,” urged Annabelle again. “We haven’t much time.”

“Come on!” yelled Erin. She took both Annabelle’s and Kim’s hands and led them to the tunnel entrance. They

entered the tunnel and closed the door just before the whole front of the boathouse collapsed to the floor. In a few minutes, they were back in Annabelle’s basement.

Erin was about to go up the stairs when Annabelle grabbed her arm. “Listen,” she cautioned. The three of them listened for a few minutes, but the house was totally quiet. Just as they started up the stairs again, they heard the familiar wail of a siren. They quickly went up and crossed through the dining room. The chest was still on the dining room table where Mr. Smith had left it.

“Look!” cried Erin. She lifted the lid on the chest. The certificates and cell phone were still tucked neatly inside. “Mr. Smith hasn’t been back here yet!”

A chill of fear immediately settled over them.

Reaching into the chest, Erin grabbed the phone and all of the certificates. She ran over to Annabelle’s doll chest, opened the glass door, and slipped everything behind a row of dolls.

“There,” Erin said, satisfied for the moment about the hiding place. “Let’s get out of here!”

When they came out onto the back porch, there were people all over. Firefighters and police officers were crossing the backyard in the direction of the boathouse. They were pulling heavy hoses into the woods. Kim pointed across the yard in the direction of their new house. Mr. Smith was there, talking to their mom, dad, and a couple of police officers. He was shouting something to them over the noise of the fire engines and police cars that were still arriving. When they got a little closer, they could finally understand what he was saying.

“I could hear someone yelling in the boathouse,” he shouted. “I tried to get to them, but the flames were just too hot.” He paused for effect and then added, “I’m sure I heard small children in there.”

“Oh, really,” said Annabelle over his shoulder. “That’s quite a story.”

Charles spun around in shock at the sound of Annabelle’s voice. His face paled as if he had just seen a ghost. “H-h-how did you get out of there?” he stammered. “I locked you in and threw the key into the river.”

“You locked who in?” asked one of the police officers. She had been listening intently to Annabelle and Mr. Smith. The officer looked at him with a questioning look.

“Watch out!” Erin shouted as Smith reached into his pocket for the screwdriver.

The officer made a grab for his arm, but he spun away from her and stepped back, pulling the weapon out of his pocket.

“Now, I’ve really had it!” yelled Kim. Before anyone could even realize what she was doing, she kicked Smith in the shins in the same spot she had kicked him before. When he doubled over in pain, Erin rammed her body into him and knocked him flat onto his back. The screwdriver flew from his hand and landed with a thud at the feet of the police officer.

“Me too,” she said, giving Kim a high five.

The officers handcuffed Smith and placed him in a squad car while Erin, Kim, and Annabelle told everyone what *really* happened. Mom and Dad couldn’t stop hugging the girls. They were so happy to know they were safe, but the girls knew they were in for a long discussion about all the secrets they had kept from them.

The next day, the story and their pictures were all over the news. Erin and Kim invited Annabelle up to her old playroom for a visit. They each presented her with a beautifully wrapped gift. Inside one was her diary, and inside the other was Kristina's tea set. Annabelle could not hold back the tears of joy as she hugged her new friends.

Annabelle had promised to build them a new boathouse and asked Erin and Kim's dad to find a good contractor.

"We still have about a month of summer left before we have to go to our new school," said Kim. "I'm really looking forward to going there and meeting new kids."

Erin wasn't so sure about the new school yet, but she thought that Matt from the drug store seemed pretty nice, so at least she would sort of know somebody.

One week later, Annabelle held a dinner party for Erin and Kim's family at her home. At the party, she told them that the Peterson fortune was estimated to be worth over twenty-million dollars.

"I owe my whole fortune to Erin and Kim," she said with a smile. "For many years I shut myself away in my home, not allowing myself to have much contact with the outside world."

As she spoke, she held out her arms for Erin and Kim to come closer. They got up and gave Annabelle a big hug. Tears formed in the corners of Annabelle's eyes, and her voice shook as she continued. "Erin and Kim have shown me that I need other people."

Patting each of them on the back, she looked at Laurie and Jim. "These two girls saved my life and gave an old recluse a reason to come out and participate in the world again."

She smiled and gave them another hug. They both knew that from that day forward, they had found themselves a friend that they could always count on.

Erin and Kim looked at each other and grinned. Their dream of opening a famous detective agency someday was looking brighter. If they could solve two mysteries in the first week, the possibilities were endless on what other adventures were in store for them!

The End

Chapter 12 Discussion Questions

K – 2nd Grade

Who became Kim and Erin's friend at the end of the story?

Do you have a friend you can always count on?

3 & 4th Grade

What did Annabelle learn about friendship at the end of the story?

How do you think Mom and Dad felt about their daughters at the end of the story? Describe their emotions.

5 & 6th Grade

Erin and Kim make a great detective team! How did the girls work together throughout the book to solve the mystery?

What lesson did Annabelle learn at the end of the story and why is that lesson significant?

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