

Chapter 8

The Old Woman

Kim let out a wail so loud that it startled both the old woman and Erin. Erin looked up at the broom, which the old woman still held high over her head, and covered her eyes. With a gasp, the old woman dropped the broom and clutched her chest.

“My goodness!” she exclaimed. “You two nearly scared me to death.” She took a few dramatic, short breaths, held her hand over her eyes and then peeked out from behind her fingers to see if the girls were paying attention.

Kim sobbed even louder. Erin leaned up on her elbows. The dramatic gesture hadn’t gone unnoticed by her. “Were you going to hit us with that broom?” she asked.

“Why I ought to take you two over my knee and give you both a good spanking for scaring an old woman that way.”

“We’re sorry for scaring you.”

Erin spoke as calmly as she could. She was even careful to emphasize the word *sorry*. “It’s just that we were in the boathouse when we saw Sniffles, and we followed Sniffles into the secret tunnel, and ended up here.”

Erin slowly rose to her feet. She dusted off her pants and then reached down to pull Kim to her feet.

Kim stood nervously behind her sister. She was ready to bolt for the tunnel entrance at the first sign of an attack. “Yes! We’re really sorry Mrs., Mrs...” Her voice trailed off. Kim really had no idea what to call the old lady.

“What’s your name?” asked Erin, trying to help Kim out of her predicament. She shifted her position a little to get a better look at the old woman.

To Erin, the woman looked well over a hundred years old. Her face was all wrinkled and her hair was pure white and pulled tightly into a bun on the back of her head. The dress that she had on was just like the ones her great grandmother wore. The cuffs, skirt hem, and collar were made of lace, and there was a row of tiny pearl buttons up the front. The buttons were tightly closed all the way to the neck, making the dress look very uncomfortable.

“You never mind what to call me,” snapped the old woman. “I’m a recluse and that should be enough for the likes of the two of you.”

“Well, then, we’re sorry Mrs. Recluse,” said Kim.

Erin giggled and nudged her sister in the arm. She knew that recluse wasn’t the old woman’s name. It was just a word for a person who wanted to be left alone.

“Don’t be impertinent,” the old woman snapped. She picked up the broom and shifted her weight to it, leaning to get a better look at the two girls.

“We’re not impertinent. Our name is Lewis,” stated Kim. “I’m Kim and this is Erin. And we’re your new neighbors.”

“New neighbors indeed,” sniffed the old woman. “You haven’t even lived next door for three whole days and already you two are over here bothering an old woman and ruining her peace and quiet.”

Kim stepped forward from behind Erin. “We didn’t mean to bother you. It’s just that we found Annabelle’s diary, and we were looking for the treasure in the tunnel, and ...ouch!” She grabbed her arm where Erin had elbowed her.

Erin gave her a ‘keep quiet’ glare. She didn’t want her to say anything else because she wasn’t sure who would own the treasure in the tunnel. The tunnel was attached to both the boathouse *and* the old woman’s house.

“Treasure? What treasure?” asked the old woman. She peered closely at Kim, ignoring Erin for the moment.

Before Kim could answer, Erin stepped in front of Kim and spoke. “There is no treasure,” she laughed nervously. “Treasure hunting is just this game we were playing before we got locked in the boathouse by someone.”

She reached behind her back and wagged her finger, trying to signal to Kim to keep quiet. It must have worked because Kim remained silent.

“Locked in the boathouse? How did you get locked in the boathouse?” asked the old woman. She seemed to have forgotten about the treasure, at least for the moment.

Erin was glad that the old woman hadn’t continued to ask about the treasure, but she still wasn’t sure if the woman could be trusted. Cautiously, she began. She told the old woman about how she and Kim had gone down to the river and were playing treasure hunt when all of a sudden someone locked

the door to the boathouse. She explained how Sniffles had shown them where the entrance to the tunnel was and how they followed him all the way into the basement.

“Who in their right mind would have locked two young children in a boathouse?”

By the sound of her voice, Erin could tell the old woman didn't completely believe them.

Erin didn't know what else she could say to convince the old woman. Someone had definitely locked the boathouse door, and whoever it was had known they were in there.

She was about to speak again when Sniffles hopped out from behind a shelf and over to her feet. She reached down and picked up the rabbit, cuddling him close to her chest. Sniffles nuzzled into her hand and she tickled him behind the ears. “Sniffles is really cute,” she said, changing the subject. “Is he yours?”

“Yes, Sniffles is my pet,” answered the old woman, “and *she* is not a *he*. *She* is a female rabbit.”

Kim reached over and tickled Sniffles. Erin could tell that she was disappointed. Erin was a little sad herself. Secretly, she had hoped they could keep the rabbit.

“Sniffles is a beautiful bunny,” sighed Erin, “and now that we know about your pet, what should we call you?” She looked up expectantly at the old woman.

“I thought her name was Mrs. Recluse,” whispered Kim.

Erin giggled again and the old woman wrinkled her nose. For a moment Erin thought she could see the traces of a smile on her face, but she wasn’t sure.

“You two may call me Miss Peterson,” she answered, her voice softening a bit. “And now I think we should go upstairs out of this damp basement.”

“I’m hungry,” Kim stated, sniffing the air. She smelled a wonderful aroma of something baking upstairs.

“Well... I’ve just taken some cookies out of the oven. Maybe you would like to share some with me?”

“What kind are they?” asked Kim. Although Erin would eat just about anything when it came to cookies, Kim was fussy about the kind of cookies she liked.

“Why, they’re chocolate chip,” answered Miss Peterson with a smile. She took a neatly-folded handkerchief out of her pocket, bent down and tenderly wiped the tears from Kim’s

checks. Kim sniffled loudly and Miss Peterson handed her the handkerchief.

“Here,” she said. “Blow your nose.”

Kim blew her nose and then tried to hand it back. The old woman held up her hand to stop her.

“No, no,” she said. “You just keep it. The way your nose is running you’ll need it again. Come on, now. Let’s have some cookies.”

Kim shrugged her shoulders and stuffed the handkerchief into her pocket. She followed Miss Peterson and Erin up the stairs and into the kitchen. In the kitchen, the girls watched Miss Peterson pick out eight of the largest cookies and put them on a plate.

“Hang on to her,” she said, reaching over and tickling Sniffles’ forehead. “She’s a cookie thief.”

Sniffles stuck her nose up in the air as if she was offended but couldn’t resist sniffing in the direction of the stack of cookies on the counter. Erin held her tightly as Miss Peterson got out three glasses, poured milk, and put everything on a tray. She ushered them into the dining room.

In the center of the dining room was a huge table with six carved, wooden chairs. Off to one side was a set of large windows with the curtains closed tightly. On the other side of the room was a large, wooden cabinet with glass doors on the front.

Kim ran over to the cabinet and pressed her face against the glass.

“Wow! Look at these, Erin!” she exclaimed, pointing to the rows and rows of porcelain dolls sitting on the shelves. Many of them were exactly like the dolls they had found in Annabelle’s playroom. One of them even had a velvet dress identical to the one Erin had held the night they had discovered the secret place.

Erin walked over to Kim and held her finger up to her lips to signal her to keep quiet about their playroom. She didn’t know enough about Miss Peterson to trust her yet.

“Come on, girls,” said Miss Peterson as she put the tray down on the table. She looked at Kim and asked, “What do you think of my doll collection? Have you ever seen so many beautiful dolls?”

Kim nodded her head yes, but she didn't tell her about their new-found collection. She walked over to the table and sat down next to Erin.

For the next half-hour they ate pretty much in silence except for the tall grandfather clock in the front hall that let out a loud and steady tick-tock. As they finished their snack, the clock chimed ten times loudly.

"We had better get going," said Erin, looking over at Kim. She slid off of the large chair and stood next to it.

Kim was relieved to hear Erin say that it was time to leave. She had finished her cookies and was slowly twisting the glass of milk between her hands. Milk was not one of her favorite drinks, so her mother usually gave her apple juice. She quickly stood up and nuzzled her body against her sister.

"Why, you haven't finished your milk, young lady," commented Miss Peterson.

"No thank you," said Kim, "I'm really full."

"Thank you for the snack, Miss Peterson." said Erin. "We must really be going now."

The old woman pursed her lips and said nothing as she led them to the front door. The girls stepped onto a large

porch that extended across the entire front of the house and wrapped around the house to the back door. Next to the front door was a porch swing that was hung from the ceiling by chains. Kim raced over to it and sat down, swinging herself gently back and forth.

“I see you like porch swings,” said Miss Peterson.

Kim smiled, “It’s great.” She swung herself a little harder this time and leaned back.

“Come on, Kim,” said Erin. “We better get home or Mom and Dad will be worried.” She reached over and pulled Kim off the swing. They started down the steps to the front walk.

When they had gone only a short distance, they stopped and turned around to see the old woman still standing on the porch staring after them. Kim waved but Miss Peterson did not return the gesture.

“If you two cut across the lawn over there,” Miss Peterson yelled, pointing toward the back yard, “you will find an old gate that leads to your back porch. It’s a shortcut I used when I was your age.”

Erin and Kim quickly crossed the yard and found the gate that the old woman told them about. After they went through the gate, they stopped and looked back toward their neighbor's house one more time. Miss Peterson was still on the porch staring at them.

“She’s nice.” commented Kim, waving at her again.

The woman nodded and raised her hand as if she were going to wave and then stopped.

“I don’t know,” answered Erin. “She gives me the creeps.”

The two girls reached their back porch. They could hear the sound of music playing from the radio in the kitchen. There were other sounds coming from the kitchen, too, so they knew that their parents were in there unpacking dishes and kitchen stuff.

Erin sat down on the porch steps and propped her head on her hands, deep in thought. “Who locked us in the boathouse? And why was there a secret tunnel to the neighbor’s house?” For Erin, the mysteries were getting more and more interesting by the minute.

Kim pulled the handkerchief that the old woman had given her out of her pocket and blew her nose.

“Look!” exclaimed Erin, pointing at the handkerchief.

The two girls stared at the cloth dangling from Kim’s fingers. On it was a beautifully embroidered ‘A’.

Chapter 8 Discussion Questions

K – 2nd Grade

What is your favorite type of cookie? Are you a picky eater like Kim?

What is the old woman like?

3 & 4th Grade

How do you think the girls felt when they were eating cookies in Miss Peterson's house?

Make a prediction: Do you think the girls and Miss Peterson will become friends?

5 & 6th Grade

Erin says a few times in this chapter that she's not sure if the old woman can be trusted. Why do you think she feels this way?

Why is the embroidered 'A' on the handkerchief important? What do you think it means?