

# **Hidden Hollow Five Series**

## **The Secret of Annabelle**

Book 1

(Youth Illustration Contest Edition)

**James R. Lewis**



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Editing by Marisa Donnelly

Contributions by Laurie Lewis, Erin Voll, and Kimberly Tozer

Discussion Questions by Marisa Donnelly

Book Design by Kimberly Tozer

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# Dedication

I dedicate this book to my daughters. They have always been my inspiration and their keen interest in my storytelling kept me going throughout their childhood. When they were very little, they would always ask me to tell them a story before they went to bed and I would make up stories with them as the main characters. Erin, my middle daughter, sat next to me as I wrote the original first draft of Annabelle's story. We decided to write at least one page every time we sat down. Over a number of months, *The Secret of Annabelle* was established and this led to the birth of the Hidden Hollow Five Series. I hope you enjoy reading this book as much as we did writing it together.

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# Chapter 1

## River's End

*Thump squeak, thump squeak, thump squeak, thump squeak...*  
“Jim! Please turn off those windshield wipers!” pleaded Mom.  
“They’re driving me crazy!” Looking up from the map on her phone, she reached over and tapped Dad on the shoulder.

*It’s about time, Erin thought, that noise was driving me crazy, too.*

Erin closed the cap on the marker she had been using and threw it into the bin on the seat next to her.

“I’m bored,” she said as she raised her arms in a long, lazy stretch. Glancing back at Kim, she sat up a little higher in the seat to get a better look at the picture her sister was drawing.

“Daddy, when are we going to get there?” asked Kim from the back seat of the van. She held the picture up so that Erin could get a better look. “I’m hungry,” she quickly added before her dad could answer.

The picture had a bright rainbow across the page, with a house directly below it and woods covering the rest of the

background. A pretty good drawing of the family van was parked out in front and there were five people standing in the driveway: Erin, Kim, their older sister Jenny, Laurie, and Jim.

Although skinny as a rail, it seemed to Erin that Kim was always hungry. She never ate much at one time, but she was always eating or wanting to eat. Erin finished her inspection of the drawing, looked up at her sister, and smiled.

“That’s pretty neat,” she said.

Kim was tall for an eight-year-old girl and quite pretty. Her long honey-blond hair was in a ponytail held by a scrunchie made of shiny red, white, and blue ribbon. With a huge smile, Kim stared back at her through her soft, brown eyes.

“Thanks. Do you want to play a game?” she asked, sliding the picture into a folder and putting away her markers. Before Erin could answer, they were interrupted by their dad.

“We’ll get there soon, honey.” Reaching over, he turned off the windshield wipers. “I’m a little hungry, too. Hey, who wants to have a picnic when we get to our new house?”

“We do!” shouted Erin and Kim together.

“Then a picnic it will be.” He said as he smiled over at Mom.

She smiled back, returning her attention to the map. “We should get there just in time for lunch.”

“Let’s have the picnic down by the riverbank,” suggested Dad. “What do you say, Laurie?”

“Sounds good.” Mom clicked off her phone and tucked it into the side pocket of the van door.

Erin and Kim smiled with delight at the thought of their very own river and woods to explore and play in. Although they had never actually seen their new house, Mom and Dad had told them about it many times.

“Tell us about the new house again,” pleaded Kim. In the excitement she had forgotten all about the offer to play she had just made with her sister.

Erin put away the rest of her markers and pad of paper and slid forward as far as her seatbelt would let her. She loved to hear about their big, new house and especially about their new bedroom with a special, round sunroom attached.

This was going to be their best house ever. They would have their very own woods and a river that ran right through

the middle of their land. Even the name of the river sounded mysterious – *Hidden Hollow River*. She and Kim just loved the sound of it. On the riverbank where they were going to have the picnic, there was an old boathouse with a pier. Dad and Mom told them that they would be able to fish, swim, and canoe off of the pier. They would have to be very careful, though, because the currents along the Hidden Hollow could get pretty swift and dangerous at certain times of the year.

Both Erin and Kim started canoeing almost before they could walk. Mom and Dad had drilled them about canoeing safety rules, and they never went canoeing without their life vests on. Mom and Dad trusted them enough that they were allowed to canoe together without supervision because they were so experienced.

“Will our canoe be delivered today?” asked Erin.

“Maybe,” answered Mom. “But probably not until tomorrow afternoon.”

“Tell us about the house again,” pleaded Kim, changing the subject.

“Well, the house was built in 1875 by the Peterson family,” said Mom. “The Petersons and the Smiths were the



founding fathers of River's End. They were also the two wealthiest families in town. We met Charles Smith Jr., a descendant of the original Smith family, when Dad and I signed the mortgage papers at the bank.”

Looking back at the two girls, she saw that they were still listening, so she continued. “Charles Smith's father, Charles Smith Sr., bought the original Peterson home in foreclosure after John Peterson mysteriously vanished on a business trip overseas many years ago. Charles Smith Sr. and his wife adopted John Peterson's only daughter and raised her as their own. The Smith family lived in our house until Charles Smith Sr. died a couple of months ago.”

“Charles, the son, still owns quite a bit of the property around our home,” Dad added. “He told us that he is out there often checking for trespassers, so we'll probably see a lot of him.”

“But he doesn't own our house, does he, Daddy?” asked Erin.

“Or the boathouse?” asked Kim.

Dad glanced in the back seat and smiled at the two of them. “No, kiddos, we own the home and the ten acres of

woods, land, and river frontage, including the boathouse and pier. They're all ours."

"Wow!" said Kim. "Ten acres! That's a lot."

"Look!" exclaimed Mom, pointing out the front window of the van at an approaching road sign. "'Ten miles to River's End.' We'll be there in about ten minutes and you two will finally be able to see it for yourselves."

The time seemed to drag on forever before they finally came over the top of a high hill and saw the city of River's End spread out before them.

"There it is, kiddos," said Dad, sweeping his hand out in front of him. "Our new home."

Erin wrinkled her nose. "It's not very big, is it?"

The city of Racine, Wisconsin, where they just moved from, had almost one-hundred thousand people. The sign for River's End said: *Population 1,112.*

"It's big enough for us," said Mom, "and I'm sure you'll both find enough eleven-year-old and eight-year-old kids to play with in a town of over a thousand people."

She looked back at Erin who was staring out the window at the city limits sign as it raced by. Mom marveled at how

much Erin had grown in the past year. Her hair was getting darker and she was shedding that ‘little girl’ look and slowly turning into a beautiful, young adolescent. Erin had an ear-to-ear smile and her sense of humor was legendary among her friends back in Racine.

Jenny, Mom’s oldest daughter, had gone through the same kind of changes at around twelve. Erin was only a little over a month from her twelfth birthday. It was interesting just how much the two older sisters looked alike; in fact, if you looked at pictures of Jenny at this age, it was difficult to tell them apart.

“I just wish Jenny could have made the trip with us,” Mom said.

“She’ll come for Thanksgiving and semester breaks,” answered Dad. “And, of course, she will be here next summer,” he quickly added.

Jenny, the oldest of the three daughters, was a sophomore in an exclusive private boarding high school in Wisconsin. She had worked hard to gain admittance and earned a full scholarship. She had thought very carefully before finally deciding to finish the remainder of her sophomore year. Mom

was sad that she didn't come with them for the rest of summer, but the school had offered her a job at the campus library and Jenny didn't want to give it up.

Dad reached over and gently touched Mom's hand. "Working at Saint Clement was a difficult decision for her, but I think it was a good one."

"I hope you're right," said Mom. "But it doesn't stop me from worrying or missing her."

"Me too," he said, patting her hand. "Me too."

It didn't take them very long to drive through the entire city and come out on the other side. On the main street, which was also the main county highway, there were only a half-dozen stores, two restaurants, a bank, and a movie theater. Anchoring one end of town on the river was an old mill, which looked like it had been shut down and boarded up for many years. There was a park next to it that spread out with a playground and picnic tables all the way to the edge of the water. In the center of town was a courthouse and police station, and on the other end of town was a huge brick building with 'River's End Elementary and Middle School' carved above the front entrance.

“And that’s where you will be going to school,” said Dad. He and Mom had been pointing out all of the buildings and as if they were tour guides. “We already enrolled you.”

“Yeah, yeah, we already know all that,” Erin cut in. “You told us that a thousand times. We start school in about four weeks, and we both have wonderful teachers.”

“Where is our house?” asked Kim, turning around and looking out through the rear window as the city disappeared behind them. She had studied each house very carefully as they drove through. Not one of them had a huge porch with a round castle tower on the front like her Daddy and Mommy had described.

“We live about a mile out of town,” said Mom. “And only six miles from Hidden Hollow Community College where Dad will be teaching.”

They drove for just a short distance longer before the kids felt the car slowing down. On the final bend in the road, Kim and Erin saw a long cobblestone driveway sandwiched between two tall willow trees. Below the trees stood two brick gateposts with a cast iron lion mounted on the top of each. A decorative iron gate to the driveway stood open.

“Look!” exclaimed Kim, pointing to the castle tower looming over the treetops in the front yard. “Is that it?”

“Yes, that’s our new home,” answered Mom.

They drove in and parked the car on the circled driveway. The front walk led to the stairs of a huge porch that stretched across the entire front of the big, old house. In the center of the porch was a carved oak entry door.

“Where’s all our stuff?”

“It should have been delivered by the moving company yesterday afternoon,” answered Mom as she got out of the van.

Kim and Erin didn’t really hear their mom’s answer because they were already scrambling up the stairs toward the front door. Erin grabbed the handle and turned, but the door was locked. Kim went over to the windows and pressed her face against the glass. Erin followed close behind. Inside they could see the front room piled high with boxes.

“Come on! Hurry up!” they cried.

When the front door was finally opened, Erin and Kim rushed inside. They ran from room to room, quickly exploring everything on the first floor. There was a large kitchen with an

adjoining walk-in pantry. Just off the kitchen was a huge dining room that led to the living room through big, glass doors. On the other side of the house and across the front foyer, was a parlor and a large library with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. Most of the shelves were empty except for a single row of books, covered in dust, on the far wall.

“Whose books are these?” asked Erin, pulling one off of the shelf and running her hands over the cover.

Dad walked over and she handed him the book. “They must have been left by the Smiths,” he said, paging through the volume. “I guess they now belong to us now.” He slid the book back into place and turned toward the kids.

“Where’s our bedroom?” asked Kim. She was eager to see the large bedroom and round sunroom attached to it.

“Come on, we’ll show you,” Mom said. She took Kim’s hand and walked up the large, curved stairway to the second floor. Erin and Dad followed behind them. When they got to the second floor, Mom and Kim turned and walked down the hallway. There was another set of stairs that continued up to the third floor. This staircase was much narrower than the stairs from the first floor.

Erin stopped and tried to peer into the darkness. “What’s up there?” she asked, pointing up the narrow stairway.

“Ghosts and goblins,” answered Dad. “So don’t ever go up there without an adult, or they will grab you and turn you into one of them!” He reached down, grabbed Erin, and tickled her until she squealed.

“Yeah, right!” said Erin, her voice full of sarcasm.

Kim huddled close to her mom and peered up the staircase, her eyes as big as saucers.

“Ahem!” Mom cleared her throat and pointed down at Kim.

“I’m only kidding, honey,” said Dad. He held out his hands for her to come. Kim ran over and he swung her into his arms.

“The only thing up those stairs is a very dusty and dirty attic. Come on, I’ll show you.”

He went up to the top of the stairs, stopped, and opened a small door. Kim hid her head on his shoulder, still not sure whether she should trust him. Erin peered around her dad to try to get a better look as the door swung slowly inward. The old door creaked on its hinges making a loud, squeaky noise.



They stepped up into the dimly-lit attic. There was nothing there except an empty wooden crate and a dusty, broken rocking chair. On two of the walls were large multi-pane windows with curtains draped loosely over them. Across from the door was a circular wall with no openings.

“What’s behind this round wall?” asked Erin, crossing the attic to the other side.

She walked from one end of the wall to the other, running her hands over the smooth, plaster surface before she spoke again. “When I looked up from the outside, I could see a lot of windows on the third floor. How come there aren’t very many up here?”

“I don’t know, honey,” answered Dad. “There ought to be a way to get in there. Perhaps there’s another entry into it from somewhere else in the house. We’ll have to look for it when we finish unpacking.”

“Let’s drill a hole in the wall,” suggested Erin. “Then we can see what’s in there.”

“It’s dangerous to just drill holes in the walls of these old houses, Erin, because you never know what you might hit,” said Dad. “There could be electrical wires, plumbing pipes, or

nothing at all. If we can't find an entrance, we might have to open this wall up. But for now, we have a lot of unpacking to do. Besides, you two haven't even seen your bedroom yet."

The girls rushed down the stairs with Mom and Dad trailing behind. They burst through the door and then suddenly stopped. It was the most beautiful bedroom they had ever seen. The room was at least twenty feet long by thirty feet wide, and the ceilings were a full nine feet high. Across the room and through an archway was the second floor sunroom that was lit up by tall, narrow windows. Their bedroom furniture and boxes of clothes and toys were stacked everywhere.

"You two have your work cut out for you," commented Mom, surveying the huge pile of boxes. "After we see the rest of the house and have our picnic, Dad and I will set up your bed. And then you two are in here until everything is put away."

Both Kim and Erin groaned. They obviously had other ideas.

“But what about finding friends?” wailed Erin. “I thought we might check out some of the houses down the road to see if they have any kids our age.”

“Not today, ladies. You’ve got to get this room in order before dark so that you can sleep in here tonight.”

“Please, Mom,” pleaded Erin. “I know! How about if we just check out that house over there?” As she spoke, she pointed at a white, wooden house that was visible from their sunroom window.

Mom shook her head. “That house is owned by a very old woman who wants to be left alone. There are no kids over there, so stay away from her house and respect her privacy.”

“But...” interrupted Erin.

“No buts,” said Mom ending the argument. She turned and walked out of the room. “Come on, we’ve got the rest of the house to explore.”

The rest of the house was pretty ordinary for Erin and Kim. There were two more bedrooms on the second floor and two big bathrooms. One of the neat things they found was another long, narrow set of stairs on the other side of the house, which led down to the first floor and ended in the back

hallway. Their dad explained to them that this stairway was used many years ago by the domestic help so they could go around the house unnoticed and get their chores done.

“What’s domestic help?” asked Erin.

“Domestic help are the people who were hired to clean the house, make the meals, make repairs, and tend the yard,” answered Dad.

Kim had a quizzical look on her face. “Are we going to have some of those?”

“I don’t think so,” answered Mom, chuckling. “We don’t make nearly enough money to hire any domestic help.”

“Aww, too bad,” sighed Kim.

Off the back hallway was a door leading to the basement. The walls of the basement were made of heavy stones, unlike the blocks Erin and Kim were used to. There was furniture, tools, a couple of old-fashioned bikes, and quite a few spider webs down the steps. The basement was divided into many smaller rooms and most of them were dark and spooky looking. After a short time down there, both Erin and Kim got a little scared and wanted to go upstairs.

“Well, let’s have that picnic,” said Dad, after they got back to the kitchen.

They all went outside to the van, got the cooler and food basket, and carried it down to the river.

It was exciting for the girls to travel down the wooded path to the river. It was just as they had imagined. They ran ahead of their mom and dad, stopping only long enough to look for interesting climbing trees or at some small animal darting into the woods. On one such stop, Kim looked up and saw the corner of the neighbor’s white house through the trees.

“Look, Erin,” she said, pointing up at a second floor window. “Someone is watching us.”

Erin glanced up just in time to see a white-haired, elderly woman disappear behind a curtain.

“Come on, Kim,” Erin said, grabbing her sister’s arm. “Mom said to leave her alone.”

The two of them raced forward to the river, not noticing the curtain move ever so slightly again as the old woman watched them disappear down the path.

When the girls reached the bank of the river, they tore off their shoes and waded into the cool, clear water.

“Look over there!” said Erin. “That must be the boathouse that Mom and Dad told us about. Let’s go see it!”

The building was grounded in the side of the riverbank. It had no windows and only one large set of double doors on the river side. The doors were locked tightly with a huge, rusty padlock. An old wooden pier was in front of the building and stuck out about fifteen feet into the river. The girls got up onto the pier and walked to the end. Through the cracks between the planks, they could see small fish swimming lazily back and forth.

“Be careful out there,” called Dad as he and Mom came out of the woods.

“Can you open up the boathouse, Daddy?” yelled Kim.

Mom and Dad came over to the boathouse and looked questioningly at the heavy, rusted padlock. Dad grabbed it and gave it a tug, but it didn’t budge.

“To tell you the truth, honey, we don’t have a key for this lock. I’ll have to cut it off as soon as we finish unpacking.”

“What do you think is in there?” asked Erin, pressing her face against a small crack between the doors. She was trying to get a look inside, but it was too dark to see anything.

“Probably nothing,” answered Dad.

“If there is a beautiful boat in there... would it be ours?” Erin asked, surveying the river with a dreamy look on her face.

“I don’t think you have to worry about finding a beautiful boat in there, Erin. That banker, Charles Smith Jr., would have charged a lot more for the property if it came with a boat.”

“But if there is a boat in there, Dad, would it be ours?” pressed Erin.

Dad poked her in the stomach, and she giggled. He draped his arm over Erin’s shoulder and grabbed Kim’s hand. “Let’s go help your mom.”

They set off for the riverbank where Mom was already spreading a blanket for the picnic.

“Well?” asked Erin.

“Well what,” said Dad, laughing.

“Would a boat in the boathouse belong to us?” she asked again.

He looked into Erin’s eyes, and seeing that she was in one of her ‘Erin is serious’ moods, he answered, “The boathouse

belongs to us, sweetheart, so anything that is in it also belongs to us. So the answer is yes.”

“I’m hungry,” Kim interrupted. “Let’s eat!”



# Chapter 1 Discussion Questions

## **K – 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade**

Kim and Erin are sisters; do you have a sibling (if not, do you have a cousin/best friend you see often)? Do you get along with him or her?

What is one thing you like about Erin and Kim's new home?

## **3 & 4<sup>th</sup> Grade**

What have you learned so far about Erin and Kim?

What do you predict is in the boathouse?

## **5 & 6<sup>th</sup> Grade**

Who is the Smith family and what information did the author give us about them?

Compare and contrast Erin and Kim's hometown of Racine, Wisconsin, to their new town of River's End. From what we know about River's End so far, how do you think the two places are similar and different?

# Chapter 2

## The Secret Door

After lunch, Erin and Kim were banished to their room until they had unpacked all of their stuff. After about an hour, Kim sat down on the bed and let out a big sigh.

“Get back to work, Kim!” exclaimed Erin. “We’ll never get done if you keep on taking breaks.”

“I don’t care,” said Kim. “We’re never going to get done anyway. We are going to be up here forever and ever with all of these boxes.”

“Well if you don’t help, we *will* be up here forever. And we’ll never be able to explore the rest of the house.” They had already crafted one of their famous, elaborate plans to search for the entrance to the secret room they saw in the attic on the third floor.

Ever since they were little, Erin and Kim were always trying to solve mysteries. Even if some mysteries were only pretend mysteries. Almost every night, they would have Mom,

Dad, or their big sister, Jenny, read to them. Mysteries were their favorite books, and now that Erin could read, she took over the task of rereading all of their favorite stories out loud to Kim at night. Both girls dreamed of being great detectives and planned for the day when they were older and could open the ‘Erin & Kim Detective Agency’.

“We’ll never finish,” Kim sighed again as she flopped back on the bed.

“Okay,” said Erin, “we’ll take a short break.” She walked into the circular sunroom. The afternoon sun lit the room beautifully. She went over to the window and looked out toward the next-door neighbor’s house. She was certain that she saw the old woman looking at her from a bedroom window, but by the time she got Kim’s attention to come take a look, the woman had disappeared behind the curtain.

Erin stood there for a moment and felt a shiver of fear travel down her spine.

“Why does she keep staring at us?” asked Kim, looking out toward the neighbor’s window. “I’m scared, and I don’t like her.”

“How can you say that? You don’t even know her. Besides, Mom said that she just wants to be left alone.” Erin opened one of the windows and hung her head out. Leaning as far out as she could, she looked up at the windows of the attic room above. “I wonder how you get up there.”

Erin could see some old lace curtains hanging on the windows, but that was about all. “There’s got to be some way to get into that room.” She slid back into the sunroom.

Kim was standing next to the window looking up at the ceiling. “But how?”

“I’ve got an idea,” said Erin, as she walked over to the far wall. “Maybe there is an entrance in this room with stairs up to the attic, just like those back stairs we saw earlier.”

She ran her hand across the wood paneling on the curved wall. “I’ll bet I’m right. Look at how thick this wall is!”

She stood in the doorway between the sunroom and the bedroom and showed Kim how the wall thickened up from one side to the other. To show how wide it was, she tried to stretch her arms across the opening, but she couldn’t. “There has got to be a secret entrance somewhere here,” she said. “Let’s knock on the walls and see if we can find it.”

For the next half hour, Erin and Kim knocked and pushed every inch of the sunroom's paneled walls but couldn't find anything. Kim went from their sunroom to their bedroom on the other side of the wall and started to search in there. After a few minutes she called out to Erin. "Come quick! I've found something!"

When Erin came into the room, she saw Kim kneeling next to the curved wall on the bedroom side.

"What did you find?"

"Listen," said Kim. She knocked on the wall three times. It sounded pretty solid.

"So..." said Erin, coming a little closer.

"Just listen to this."

*Thump, thump, thump.* Kim knocked in the same spot. Then she slid over about two feet and rapped on the wall again. *Boink, boink, boink.* It sure sounded different.

"Do you think this could be it?" asked Kim, knocking again.

"Let's see if we can find a secret handle, or a latch, or something that will open this wall," said Erin, sliding down next to Kim.

They both poked and prodded the old wood. After a few minutes of searching, Erin felt a loose piece of trim. She twisted it, and it slid easily on a smooth metal pin.

“Kim! Look at this!”

Erin twisted hard on the trim and immediately there was a scraping sound from the hollow portion of the wall. A panel slid back to reveal a dark tunnel. Kim stuck her head into the opening and saw a narrow set of stairs leading up to the third floor attic room.

“Let’s go up there!” said Erin, leaning over Kim’s shoulder and looking up the stairs.

“It’s too dark,” answered Kim. “Go get my flashlight. It’s next to the bed.”

Erin quickly got the flashlight and slid into the narrow tunnel in front of Kim. “Stay close.”

Erin crept up the first three stairs and then turned around and shined the flashlight back toward the opening. Kim had not entered into the tunnel yet.

“Come on, scaredy-cat! We’ve got a flashlight.”

“What if there are ghosts and goblins up there?” stammered Kim, backing away from the entrance. “Or maybe

there's somebody up there. Maybe there's even a dead body or something! We should go get Mom and Dad."

Erin shined the flashlight down on the steps. There were footprints in the dust where she had just stepped but no others.

"Look at this, Kim," she said. "If there were any ghosts or goblins up here, they would have left some footprints and there aren't any except mine. Stop being such a scaredy-cat and come up here with me!"

Kim stuck out her chin boldly and then stepped into the opening. "I'm not a scaredy-cat."

"Well then come on! Let's go."

Erin stepped onto the next step when suddenly, behind them, the door to the secret entrance slammed shut.

"Yeeeeeeeee!" squealed Kim, bursting into tears. She started to pound on the door.

Erin stood there for a moment, frozen in fear, and unsure of what to do next. She shined the light up and down the dark stairway but nothing moved. She had no clue as to who or what had shut the door.

"Kim, did you shut the door?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

“No,” wailed Kim without turning around. She continued to pound on the door. “Help!”

Erin came down the stairs and stood next to Kim. She shined the flashlight all around the entryway. She couldn’t find any way to open the door.

“Help me, Kim,” she exclaimed. “We’ve got to find some way out of here!”

Kim stopped her pounding and looked up. “Maybe if we yell loud enough, Mom and Dad will hear us.”

“They’ll never hear us in here, Kim. They’re all the way downstairs.”

“Then what do we do!?”

Erin gently wiped the tears from Kim’s face. Taking a deep breath to calm down, she gave Kim a hug and said, “I’m scared, too.” She knew she had to think of something quickly or else both of them would panic. “I know,” she stated bravely, “let’s go up to the secret room. Then we’ll open a window and call down to Mom and Dad.”

She wasn’t sure if her plan would work, but it was the best she could come up with at the moment. Taking Kim’s hand,



she gave her a tug and started back up the stairs. When she stepped on the fourth step, the door magically slid open.

“Look! It opened!” Kim shouted as she raced back down and zipped through the opening. “Let’s get out of here!”

“We must have done something to make it open.”

Kim peered back into the secret entrance and looked up at Erin. “Aren’t you coming out?”

Erin ignored Kim’s question and carefully studied the steps leading up to the attic. On the fourth step, she could see a small metal spring attached to the board. “I’ll bet this is it, Kim. Step back away from the opening, and let’s see if it closes.”

Kim shook her head. “No way! I’m getting out of here.”

She backed away from the entrance but stopped for a moment to look at her sister. “Are you coming?”

“Just stay out there. Away from the door. I’m going to try something. If it shuts and I can’t get it back open, then open it from the outside with the latch.”

“Okay...” answered Kim hesitantly.

Erin stepped down on the fourth step. The door immediately slammed shut. She listened carefully, but she could barely hear Kim's muffled voice through the wall.

"Erin! Erin! Can you hear me?"

"Yes, I can barely hear you," she yelled back. "Stay away from the door." She stepped off of the fourth step and immediately stepped back on it. The door slid quietly open and Kim appeared back in the entry.

"What did you do?"

"There is a secret latch on this step," said Erin, pointing at the fourth step. "Watch this."

She stepped up and down on it. The door opened and closed each time.

"That's neat," said Kim. "Let me try it."

Kim came up the stairs and stepped on the corner of the step. The door closed. She stepped on and off and the door opened and shut each time.

"Well, we solved that mystery," beamed Kim.

"We?" asked Erin. "I don't think so. *I* solved this one."

"So what," said Kim, forgetting her earlier fears. "Let's go up to the attic room and see what's up there."

The two of them continued up the steps and around the curved wall. When they reached the top, there was a closed door. On the door was a huge heart carved in-the wood. At the center of the heart were some words. Erin shined the flashlight on the heart so that she could get a better look.

“What does it say?” asked Kim.

Carved into the wood in the center of the heart were the words, “Annabelle’s Secret Playroom.” Erin read the words aloud. The ‘A’ on the name Annabelle was carved in a beautiful fancy shape.

“Who’s Annabelle?” asked Kim. “Do you think she might still be in there?”

Erin gave her sister a strange look, then shrugged her shoulders as she reached up and turned the knob. The door opened with a loud click and swung noisily back on squeaky hinges. It obviously hadn’t been opened in a very long time.

The two of them stood and stared into the room beyond.

# Chapter 2 Discussion Questions

## **K – 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade**

Kim doesn't like unpacking. What's a chore you don't like?

Do you have a playroom at home (or, if you don't, can you imagine a dream playroom)? What toys are in it?

## **3 & 4<sup>th</sup> Grade**

How do you think Erin and Kim felt when the secret door slammed shut on them the first time?

What do you predict is in the playroom?

## **5 & 6<sup>th</sup> Grade**

Why do you think Erin felt a shiver of fear when she saw the old woman in the window? Would you be scared?

Describe the scene where Erin and Kim discover the secret door. How are both of the girls brave in their own ways?

# Chapter 3

## Annabelle's Playroom

“Wow!” said Kim. “Look at all this stuff!”

Inside Annabelle's playroom were all kinds of toys and furniture. Everything in the room was covered with a thick layer of dust. Clearly, the room had not been used for many, many years, but it was evident that the room had belonged to a little girl just like them.

“Who owns all this stuff, Erin?” Kim could barely contain herself as they climbed up the last two steps into the room.

“Annabelle. Whoever that is.” answered Erin. “It was her playroom, after all.”

The girls walked over to a large wooden cabinet and opened the heavy wooden doors. Inside were three shelves filled with beautiful dolls. On the bottom of the cabinet was a drawer with beautiful brass handles dangling in front of it.

“Oh!” exclaimed Erin, staring at the wonderful collection. “This one is so beautiful.” She picked up a porcelain doll with

a long lace and red velvet dress. The doll had very long, soft hair that someone had brushed and braided carefully.

“I think I’ll name her Annabelle after her owner,” she whispered. She hugged the doll close to her chest.

Kim reached up and grabbed a doll dressed in a stunning evening gown. “I want this one.”

She also hugged the doll closely to her chest, copying her big sister.

Erin reached down and opened the bottom drawer of the cabinet. There, neatly folded, were dozens of dresses and outfits, waiting to be put on the dolls. There was every imaginable accessory a young girl could wish for. There were even tiny ivory brushes and combs to groom the dolls’ hair.

“Why would Annabelle leave all of this stuff in here?” asked Kim, her arms gesturing around the room. “Why wouldn’t she take any of it with her?”

Erin scrunched up her face, deep in thought. “I don’t have a clue. Maybe she died a tragic death with her parents and we are the very first ones to find her secret playroom. Or maybe she just left and didn’t have time to take all of her stuff with her.”

“Na-ah,” said Kim with absolute certainty. “She would never leave all this stuff here on purpose.”

“This mystery is getting more and more interesting. We will just have to discover what happened for ourselves.” Erin rubbed her hands together with a big smile on her face. “Let’s start looking for some clues.”

They carefully placed the dolls back into the cabinet, and for the next few minutes, the girls made a quick search of the room. In the center was a small, child-sized table with four chairs. The table was set for two with big, beautiful china plates, covered in a thick coat of dust. In fact, there was a layer of dust on everything in the room. Kim picked up one of the plates and blew on it. A small cloud filled the air around them.

“Oh no, Kim! Look what you’ve done.” Erin coughed, waving her hands in front of her face.

“I’m sorry,” she said. She couldn’t help but giggle. Erin had a layer of film on her face, making her look rather silly and as pale as a ghost.

“Quick, open up one of the windows,” Erin sputtered, wiping her cheeks.

Kim went over to one of the windows and tried to lift the heavy latch. She grunted and groaned, but no matter how hard she lifted, it wouldn't budge.

“Erin, I need help.”

Erin walked over and the two of them lifted with all their might. The window screeched as it slowly slid open. They stuck their heads outside and gulped in the fresh air. Erin looked over at the old woman's house. She could see her staring at them out of the second story window.

“Look, Kim!” exclaimed Erin. “There she is again!”

Kim looked up just in time to see the old woman disappear behind the curtain.

“I wonder why she keeps watching us,” said Erin, thinking out loud.

“I don't know. But she gives me the creeps.”

They stared at the old woman's house but neither of them saw her again. After a short time, Erin stuck her head back into the room. The dust had cleared enough for them to continue their search for clues.

“Come on, Kim. Let's keep looking.”



Along with the chest full of dolls and the table, chairs, and china set, they found a large doll house in one corner of the room and a carved wooden chest in another. They walked over to the doll house and peered through the detailed windows. Every single part of the doll house was exactly the same as their new home.

“Look!” exclaimed Erin. “It’s this house! It even has furniture! I bet this is the way the original furniture looked in the house.”

“And look,” pointed Kim. “Here is the secret playroom.”

Erin slid around to the side of the doll house where Kim sat. Sure enough, there was the playroom, complete with the same hand-carved miniature furniture. Even the turret room and windows were identical.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” said Kim in a dreamy voice.

“It sure is,” said Erin. “Come on! Let’s keep looking.”

Erin tugged at Kim’s sleeve. Kim reluctantly turned away from the doll house and continued the search with her sister. They crossed the room and stood over the wooden chest. On the surface were beautifully carved flowers and some carefully-etched lettering.

“What does it say?” asked Kim.

Erin reached down and wiped away the dust. “It says, ‘Annabelle’s Hope Chest’.”

“What’s a hope chest?”

“That’s a chest, in olden days, kids would fill with all kinds of useful items they might need when they got older. They would put all kinds of things in it. Like blankets, pots and pans, silverware—you name it.”

“Oh,” said Kim not really listening to Erin’s explanation. She reached down and lifted the lid of the chest.

Inside was a hand-knitted comforter and a fancy set of silverware. There was also a full set of plates, cups, and saucers wrapped in tissue paper. The girls carefully took out and inspected each item.

“What’s that?” asked Kim, pointing at a book wedged in the bottom corner of the chest. She reached down and pulled the book out from under the remaining plates. It was thick and looked like it would be expensive. The cover was leather with flowers imprinted on it. She opened the cover and inside, neatly lettered in pen and ink, were the words, *To My Darling Daughter, Annabelle, on her Eleventh Birthday, September 17th.*

“That’s my age and birthday!” exclaimed Erin. Standing next to Kim, she had read the inscription out loud. She stopped reading and glanced over at her sister.

“This is toooooo spooky,” said Kim. She handed the book over to Erin. “I’m getting out of here.”

Erin tucked the book under her arm and the two of them went down the stairs to their bedroom.

When they got back into the bedroom, Erin shut the secret panel and crossed over to the bed. “I’ll bet the answer to the whole mystery is in this diary,” she proclaimed, flipping through the pages.

Over half of the pages in the book were faithfully filled in by who the girls assumed could only be Annabelle. Each new entry had a month and day printed on the top of the page.

“We’ll read this tonight after we go to bed.”

Erin took the book and slid it under the mattress. “Don’t tell Mom or Dad about this book until we’ve had a chance to read it and solve the mystery.”

“Let’s show Mom and Dad the secret room!” said Kim excitedly.

“Not yet,” said Erin, putting her hand on Kim’s shoulder to hold her back. “Let’s wait till we’ve read the diary first to see if there are any clues about what happened to Annabelle. We can show Mom and Dad the secret room anytime. But first, we should solve the whole mystery.”

# Chapter 3 Discussion Questions

## **K – 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade**

What is your favorite toy and why?

If you found a secret playroom in your house, what would you do?

## **3 & 4<sup>th</sup> Grade**

Why do you think Erin wanted to keep the playroom a secret from their parents?

Have you ever kept a secret from someone you loved?

## **5 & 6<sup>th</sup> Grade**

Make a prediction: What do you think the diary will say?

Why do you think the owner left all of the items in the playroom behind?

# Chapter 4

## The Diary

That evening, Kim could hardly contain her excitement. At the dinner table, she kept hinting to Mom and Dad about the secret door and playroom they had discovered. But Erin had sworn her to secrecy, and it took a swift kick under the table to get her to keep her mouth shut. Mom and Dad exchanged a quizzical look but didn't try to guess what was going on.

After dessert, Erin stretched and yawned loudly. "Boy, I'm really tired," she proclaimed. "I think I'll go to bed early tonight."

She glanced over at Kim, hoping she would take the hint and follow her lead. Kim just stared at her without saying a word.

"How about it, Kim? Shall we go to bed nice and early tonight so we can get an early start on our room tomorrow morning?" she urged, hoping Kim would catch on.

“I’m not tired,” answered Kim.

Erin gave her another swift kick under the table. This time Kim let out a howl and grabbed her leg.

“Okay,” said Dad. “What’s going on?” He looked from one girl to the other.

“Oh, nothing,” answered Erin, trying to sound as innocent as she could. “We’ve got a surprise for you and Mom. And Kim was about to ruin it.”

She hadn’t *really* lied because she figured when they finally did show their mom and dad the secret playroom, it would actually be a surprise.

“A surprise?” asked Mom, raising one eyebrow. She looked first at Erin and then at Kim. “The only surprise I want to see is your room straightened up and the rest of those boxes emptied. By the way, where were you two this afternoon? When I came up to check on you the first time, you were not in your room. You were supposed to stay in your room until it was finished. There were at least a couple of times we could have used your help.”

Erin didn’t know how to answer her mom. She didn’t want to tell her about their discovery just yet, but by the look

on Mom's face, it was clear she expected an answer. Mom must have come into their bedroom while she and Kim were up in Annabelle's playroom! Just as Erin was about to tell her the whole story, Mom held up her hand and, exchanging a look with Dad, said, "Never mind. Keep your surprise."

"One question," Dad interjected. "Will we like the surprise?"

"Oh, yeah!" they both chimed in.

"Okay," said Dad. "There will be plenty of time tomorrow to finish your bedroom."

Erin let out the breath she had been holding. Kim smiled at her. They knew their secret was safe for the time being.

"Can we be excused?" Erin asked, jumping up and grabbing her plate.

Without waiting for an answer, both she and Kim put their dishes in the sink and raced up the back stairs to their bedroom.

The large, white canopy bed was set up against the wall directly across from the circular room's windows. There were no curtains on the windows yet, and a huge moon splashed a bright white glow throughout the room.



“Don’t turn on the light, Kim,” Erin said as she crossed the room to the windows. She hung her head out the window and looked down at the lawn below. The moon was so bright that it almost looked like daytime outside. The shadows from the trees danced back and forth across the grass, pushed by a gentle August breeze.

“Gee, Kim, the moon was never this bright back in Racine. Half the time we could hardly even see the stars! Just look at all of them up there!”

Kim stuck her head out the window and looked up. “Wow! Are there more stars here than back at our old house?”

Erin giggled. “No, silly, there are the same amount here as back in the city. It’s just that we can see them much better because there are a lot less lights here compared to Racine.”

They sat there for a long time, staring up at the sky and pointing out the different types of patterns the stars made.

“Come on, Kim,” said Erin, poking her head back into the room. “We’ve got to find out what’s in Annabelle’s diary.”

The two of them quickly undressed, got into their pajamas, and brushed their teeth. A few minutes later, they

were snuggled together in bed, with Erin holding the old diary and Kim shining the flashlight.

“We’ve got to read Annabelle’s diary closely and look for any clues that might help us figure out why she left all her stuff here,” said Erin.

“Then start reading!” squealed Kim.

For the next two hours, Erin read all of Annabelle’s entries. They found out that Annabelle had gotten the diary for her eleventh birthday from her real father and that she had a best friend named Kristina. Annabelle and Kristina did everything together. They played with their dolls and had tea parties up in the secret playroom for hours and hours. In the summer, they would go down to the river and fish off of the dock. They would even sneak down and swim alone in the river (even though Annabelle’s now adoptive parents forbade them from swimming without an adult because the current was too swift). There were also many sharp rocks and deep pools in the river, but Annabelle and Kristina believed they were good enough swimmers to stay safe.

“Why didn’t they listen to their mommy and daddy?” asked Kim. The part about sneaking out to the river and swimming without permission really bothered her.

“How am I supposed to know?” answered Erin. She had a feeling that something bad was about to happen. “Let’s keep on reading.”

They heard their Mom call from the bottom of the stairs. “Are you two in bed yet? It’s way past your bedtime!”

“Come on, Mom! Can’t we stay up just a little longer?” Erin whined. “It’s summertime.”

“Yeah,” said Kim reinforcing her sister.

Mom and Dad came upstairs and entered their room. Erin quickly slipped the diary under the covers before they noticed.

They came over to the bed and sat on the edge. “You two have had a really big day,” said Dad. “It’s time for you to go to sleep. There will be other nights for you to stay up late.”

He bent down and gave them each a kiss and hug. Mom tucked them in and noticed a lump next to Kim. “What’s this?” she asked, tapping the flashlight.

“Oh please, Mommy,” pleaded Kim. “Can’t we have a flashlight on our first night? Please!” She sat up in bed and put her arms around her mother’s neck.

“You’re not going to read, are you? I really want you two to go to sleep. Tomorrow you have to finish this bedroom.” She gestured toward all the boxes that the two girls had not yet opened.

“Just an extra ten minutes,” said Erin. She gave her best pleading look, first to Mom and then to Dad.

Mom nodded her head. “Ok, just ten more minutes. But what are you going to read? The books are still packed away.”

“I know exactly where they are,” said Erin, jumping out of bed and rushing over to one of the boxes. “Right here,” she said pointing down.

She ripped the top open and looked in. Inside were knickknacks and pictures. “Oops,” she said. “Wrong one.”

“Why don’t you read this one,” said Dad, reaching down under the covers and picking up Annabelle’s diary. He started to glance through it.

“No!” shouted Erin, startling everybody in the room. She ran over to her father and snatched the book away. “That’s my diary, and you can’t read it.”

“Well, then, why don’t you put an entry in your diary tonight if you can’t find a book?”

Both Kim and Erin looked at each other and smiled. This was perfect. It couldn’t have worked out any better if they had planned it. “Good idea, Dad,” they both said at the same time.

Mom and Dad tucked the two of them in and left the room. On their way out, Mom reminded them again that they had only ten minutes and then lights out.

When they were finally gone, Erin opened the book to where they left off.

“How much more is there?” asked Kim.

Erin paged through the book to the end. They only had about twenty pages left.

“That’s strange,” said Erin. “Most of the book is empty. If we’re going to find any clues about what happened to Annabelle and why she left all of her stuff up here, the clues had better be in the last few pages.”

“Well, then, start reading!” prompted Kim.

Once again, Erin began to read the diary. There was just more of the same about Kristina and Annabelle.

“No clues so far,” she said, turning to the second-to-last page.

“Today is the worst day of my life,” she read out loud.

Kim, who had been lying on her side and dozing off, sat up straight in bed. “What did you just say?” she asked.

“I think this is it,” said Erin excitedly, reading on.

“Come on, Erin, what does it say?”

“Let me read it to you,” answered Erin. She could feel the prickle of tears in her eyes.

### *July 13th*

*Today is the worst day of my life. Kristina slept over last night because she wanted to go swimming this morning. We got up early and went down to the dock. The river was running faster than usual because of all the rain we've been having lately. I begged her not to go into the water, but she just wouldn't listen to me. She always had such a strong will of her own. I refused to go in with her, and I'm so sorry. She was swept away from the shore almost immediately. There was nothing I could do.*

*She kept screaming for me to help her and all I could do was run back to the house and get my adoptive father. By the time he got down to the river she had disappeared beneath the surface. It was hours before they found her body miles down the river. I can't stop crying. If only I wasn't such a chicken, I would have been in that river with her. Maybe I could have saved her life. Now I've lost my best friend forever. Love, Annabelle*

The page was smeared toward the bottom. Annabelle must have been crying pretty hard because there were large water stains. Kim began to cry. Erin reached over and gave her a hug.

“It’s okay, Kim,” she said. “That all happened a long time ago.”

“But I was beginning to really like them, Erin! What happened to Annabelle?”

“I don’t know,” said Erin. “Let’s keep on reading.”

There was only one more entry. It was dated four days later.

*July 17th*

*Yesterday was Kristina's funeral. I've decided that I will make no more entries in this diary after today. This morning Kristina's mom came over to visit me. She brought over the silver tea set that I gave her for her eleventh birthday. It was very expensive and I told her Mom that she should keep it, but she refused. She said it hurt too much to see it in her house because it was Kristina's most treasured possession. I accepted it from her, but I've decided I will put Kristina's tea set in our secret hiding place in the playroom. Also, in the secret hiding place are all of Kristina's and my most treasured items. I've also decided to put this diary up in the playroom for someone to find someday. Whoever finds this diary and finds the secret hiding place, you are welcome to our treasures. I've decided that early tomorrow morning I will run away from here forever. I love you, Kristina, and will miss you always. Love, Annabelle*

“You mean she just ran away and left all her possessions behind?!” asked Kim.

“That's what it says,” answered Erin, “and we're going to find that treasure tomorrow morning.”



# Chapter 4 Discussion Questions

## **K – 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade**

How do you think Annabelle was feeling when writing her last diary entry?

Why did the diary make Kim cry?

## **3 & 4<sup>th</sup> Grade**

Have you ever done something dangerous and regretted it?

What emotions do you think Annabelle was feeling writing her last diary entries?

## **5 & 6<sup>th</sup> Grade**

Why do you think Annabelle ran away?

Have you lost a friend or loved one? Can you relate to some of the emotions Annabelle expressed in her diary?

# Chapter 5

## The Secret Hiding Place

The early morning sun blazed through the open window. Erin and Kim jumped out of bed and quickly got dressed. They could hardly wait to eat breakfast and then start their search for Annabelle's hiding place.

All through breakfast they waited, but Mom and Dad didn't mention that they had to clean their bedroom or empty any of the boxes; so, *technically*, they figured they were free to go ahead and search the playroom until they got busted. When they got up to their bedroom, Erin paused before she reached out and opened the hidden door's latch. "When do you think we should tell Mom and Dad about Annabelle's playroom?" she asked.

Kim thought for a moment and then answered, "Let's find the treasure first. Then we can tell them everything."

"Okay," agreed Erin, not needing much encouragement. She reached up and twisted the molding and the door slid

silently open. They went up to the playroom and stood in the center, deciding where to begin.

“Where do you think we should start?” asked Kim after a moment of silence. Although she was excited about the search for the hidden treasure, the room seemed a little overwhelming.

“Let’s check the walls first,” suggested Erin. She had thought about the hunt all through breakfast and had developed a plan to search the room in an organized way so they wouldn’t miss anything. For the next half hour, the two girls poked and prodded every inch of the playroom’s walls but found nothing. When they had finally eliminated all possible hiding places on the walls, they started on the doll closet. They carefully took everything out of the closet and searched the inside woodwork. After removing the drawer and finding nothing behind it, they put everything back into the closet just the way they found it.

“I give up,” stated Kim, plunking herself down on one of the chairs. She leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table and her head in her hands.

“We’ve only checked two things so far!” exclaimed Erin.  
“We still have a million places to look!”

“A million?” cried Kim. She rolled her eyes and then dropped her head further into her hands, mumbling, “Now I really give up.”

“Ok, you can give up if you want. But then I get to keep the treasure when I find it.”

She knew that would get action from her little sister. Kim was up in a flash.

“I’m ready now. Where should we look next?” she asked, crossing over to stand beside Erin.

The two of them searched every nook and cranny over the next two hours but could not find any treasure. When they had looked just about everywhere they could imagine, they both sat down at the table to plan their next move.

“I don’t think there is any old treasure,” grumbled Kim after a moment’s rest.

Erin wasn’t too sure anymore. Her confidence was a little shaken and she couldn’t think of another place to look that they hadn’t already searched at least twice.

Kim got up and walked over to the doll house. She started to play with the miniature furniture. She moved the table across the tiny playroom and the doll closet over to the opposite wall. Reaching down, she opened the tiny doors to the closet. The inside was painted to look like there were rows and rows of dolls on the shelves. The tiny drawer slid open, and inside were little bits of cloth carefully folded to look just like the doll clothes in the large closet.

“Look at this stuff, Erin,” she marveled.

Erin came across the room and knelt down next to Kim. Bending in close, she peered into the tiny closet.

“Wow,” she said. “It’s just like the real thing. I wonder what’s in the hope chest. I’ll bet it’s just like the real one.”

She reached down and tried to lift the lid on the miniature hope chest. It didn’t budge. “I wonder why this doesn’t open.”

Erin reached into the doll house to take out the chest. She held it close to her face so she could get a better look at it.

“Look!” exclaimed Kim, pointing at the spot where the chest had been. There on the floor of the doll house was a neatly painted ‘X’.

“That’s it!” exclaimed Erin. “You’ve found it!”

“Found what?” asked Kim.

“The ‘X’!” replied Erin. She got up and rushed over to the large hope chest. “On old treasure maps, ‘X’ always marks the spot where the treasure is hidden!” She gave the chest a hard push but it wouldn’t budge.

“Come give me a hand!”

Kim dashed across the room and together they pushed the chest out of the way. Under it was a cleverly hidden handle built into the false floor. The girls could just make out the outline of a trap door.

“Go ahead, Kim,” urged Erin. “You’re the one who found the secret hiding place.”

Kim reached down and lifted the handle. Inside, a cloth bag and a wooden box were nestled in the opening. A newspaper and a small envelope were next to the wooden box. They carefully took everything out. Twenty silver dollars and fifteen gold coins were inside the bag. In the wooden box was the most beautiful silver tea set that the girls had ever seen. “This must be the silver set that belonged to Kristina,” said Erin.

She reached into the hiding place, took out the envelope, and opened it. Inside was a single sheet of paper with a note in Annabelle's handwriting. Erin read the note aloud.

*If you are reading this note, you have found my secret hiding place and all of the treasure inside. You are welcome to it, but there is more if you're willing to look. With this key you can get into the boathouse where the real treasure is hidden.*

*Good Luck. Love, Annabelle*

“What key?” asked Erin. She looked around the floor and back into the hiding place but could not find the key that Annabelle had mentioned in the note.

Kim picked up the envelope off of the floor and tipped it upside-down but there was nothing inside. She picked up the newspaper and out of it dropped a large heavy metal key. It clanged loudly as it hit the floor of the playroom.

“That's it!” cried Erin, picking it up off the floor and holding it up to the light. The key had a beautiful floral design on the handle and three teeth on the end. It looked as if it

would be a perfect match to the rusty old padlock on the door of the boathouse.

“Erin! Kim!” The sound of their mother’s muffled voice startled the two girls.

“Uh-oh. We’re dead,” sighed Kim.

“Where are those two?” They heard their mother say.

Erin slid the key and Annabelle’s note into her pocket and grabbed Kim’s arm. “Don’t say anything about the treasure out in the boathouse,” she urged. “We’ll find it first, and then show Mom and Dad.”

“Okay,” answered Kim.

The two girls quickly went back down the stairs to show their parents everything they had found so far.

“Where have you two been? And why isn’t your room done yet?” demanded Mom when Erin and Kim entered the bedroom through the secret entry. “Here it is, almost lunch time, and it doesn’t look as if you two have done anything in here!”

She was so upset she hadn’t even noticed the secret door to Annabelle’s playroom. Erin inched over to the secret latch and quickly turned it. The door shut with a bang.



“And another thing...” Mom never finished what she was about to say. She looked over at the wall where Erin and Kim had just appeared and then back at the girls.

“What was that noise? And where did you two just come from?” she asked, crossing over to where the secret door had shut.

Erin and Kim both started to giggle, but before they could answer their mom, Dad walked into the room.

“What’s going on in here? It doesn’t look like you two did anything this morning.” Standing in the doorway with arms folded across his chest, he leaned on the door jam. When he had this look on his face, the girls knew they had some explaining to do.

“What in the world are you doing, Laurie?”

The girls turned to see their mom carefully running her hands over the wall where the secret door was located.

“Okay, girls. Where’s the door?” she asked, turning around and smiling quizzically at Kim and Erin.

“We found a secret playroom with dolls, and toys, and a huge doll house, and a secret hiding place, and—ouch!” Kim

stopped mid-sentence and glared at Erin, who had pinched her arm.

“Kim! Don’t tell them everything! Let’s show them.”

Erin reached up and turned the latch. The door slid open. Mom leaned her head into the opening and looked up the stairs.

“Well, I’ll be,” she declared. “Jim, come and take a look at this.”

Dad crossed the room and stepped into the opening.

“I see you girls have found that entry into the upper turret room.” He smiled back into the bedroom at Erin and Kim. “That was quite a piece of detective work. What did you say was up there?”

“We’ll show you,” they both said at the same time.

Grabbing a flashlight, the two of them rushed through the door past Dad. When Kim got to the third step, Erin grabbed her arm to stop her from going any further. Kim looked back questioningly, but before she could say anything, Erin put her finger to her lips to signal that she wanted to surprise Mom and Dad with the automatic door-closer.

“Come on in,” she urged.

When they both stepped into the opening, Erin signaled Kim to continue on up. The moment she stepped on the fourth step, the door slammed shut.

“What happened?” asked Dad. “Who shut the door?”

He turned back and started running his hands over the door, but he could not find a latch to open it.

“I know how to open it,” said Erin.

“Me too,” said Kim.

Both Mom and Dad looked up at the girls. “Well?” they said, waiting.

“Everybody stand back,” ordered Erin. She looked up at Kim and gave her a smile.

“Open,” she commanded, as Kim stepped down on the fourth step. The door opened just as she had commanded.

“Now shut,” she commanded again, as Kim stepped down on the fourth step again.

“Now open,” she instructed. The door slid open again.

Both girls giggled at their parents’ confusion.

“All right, how did you do that?” asked Mom.

“I’ll show you,” said Kim. “Shut!” She stepped down on the step. The door slid shut.

“Kim!” cried Erin.

“Oops!”

Dad came up the steps and lifted Kim off the fourth step and put her back down on it. The door slid open. He then swooped down on both girls and tickled them until they begged him to stop.

“Jim, not on the stairs,” said Mom.

“Yes, Jim,” sing-songed Erin, trying to copy Mom’s voice.

“Not on the stairs!”

“I’ll get you later,” he answered, giving her one last tickle.

The two girls raced up ahead of their parents and opened the door to Annabelle’s playroom.

When their parents finally reached the entrance, they showed them all of the wonderful things they had found, including the beautiful tea set. A couple of times Kim almost blabbed about the key and the note that Erin had slipped into her pocket, but Erin was able to change the subject each time. Their secret was still safe.

# Chapter 5 Discussion Questions

## **K – 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade**

What is a detective?

If you found a treasure map, what treasure would you hope to find?

## **3 & 4<sup>th</sup> Grade**

Why do you think Erin wanted to keep the key a secret?

Do you think the girls will show their parents the treasure chest? Why or why not?

## **5 & 6<sup>th</sup> Grade**

Pretend you were going to show a parent, guardian, or close friend your secret playroom. Predict how they would react.

Think back to your earlier prediction about the boathouse. Now that you know a little more information, does your prediction about what's in the boathouse change?

# Chapter 6

## The Boathouse

Erin and Kim stayed the rest of the day, and well into the night, cleaning and straightening their new bedroom. They even got started on the third floor playroom, which they now called ‘Erin, Kim, and Annabelle’s Playroom.’ Dad said he would carve their names into the door as soon as they cleaned it up and proved that they could keep it clean.

“Whew!” exclaimed Erin, sitting down on one of the playroom chairs. “This is really hard work.”

“Look!” said Kim, pointing out the window. “There she is again.”

Erin got up from her chair and walked over to the window. Sure enough, the old woman was staring out her window at them. This was at least the fifth time they had caught her peering from behind the curtain.

“Maybe she’s friendly,” offered Erin, waving at her.

The woman immediately shut her curtain without returning the wave. The bedroom light behind the curtain turned off and the room went completely dark.

“Yeah, right. Real friendly!” said Kim, turning away from the window.

The two of them continued to work on the playroom for another hour without seeing the old woman again. Just as they were putting the finishing touches on the new playroom, their mom called up the stairs and informed them that it was time for them to take their showers and get ready for bed.

“Tomorrow we’ll find that treasure in the boathouse,” proclaimed Erin, patting the key that was still securely in her pocket. “And then we’ll be rich!”

The next morning they were up bright and early, ready to start out on their new adventure. After breakfast they hurried out the door, only to be stopped by Dad.

“Where are you two off to today?” he asked.

“We decided we would go down to the boathouse today and explore along the river,” answered Erin. “We also wanted to check out our canoe and see if there’s any damage by the movers.”

She didn't wait for an answer. She turned on her heels, scurried off the huge back porch and across the yard. Kim followed closely behind.

"You two be extra careful down by the river," cautioned Dad. "And don't take the canoe out without wearing your life vests. I stored them under the canoe."

He stood at the screen door and watched them cross the lawn toward the woods.

"And be careful," he added, loud enough to be sure they heard him. "Observe those rules of safety we taught you."

"We will," they both yelled from the edge of the woods.

When they had gone far enough into the woods to be out of sight, Erin stopped and turned toward Kim. "Give me five," she said.

Kim reached out and slapped her hand. "Let's get rich!"

They ran down the path toward the river. They emerged from the woods, glanced at their canoe by the shore, and headed immediately in the direction of the boathouse.

"Did you bring the key?" asked Kim. "Because I brought my flashlight." Racing ahead to the boathouse door, Kim grabbed ahold of the old padlock and gave it a tug. It held fast.



“Of course,” answered Erin, pulling the key and note out of her pocket.

“I also brought the note in case there is a clue in it that we might have missed.”

She took the key and slipped it into the rusty padlock. It fit perfectly. One quick turn was all that was needed to open the lock.

“Come on,” she said, turning to Kim. “Give me a hand.”

They pulled as hard as they could, and the huge door started to creak open. When they pulled it back far enough to enter, they peered into the old boathouse. Inside were all sorts of boating equipment and a few tools. There was an old wooden canoe hanging upside-down on a pair of concrete blocks and old life jackets resting neatly on the wall. Leaning up against the other wall was a set of paddles. On the back wall was a floor-to-ceiling cabinet with two big doors that had many small drawers on the inside.

“Let’s get started,” Erin said, stepping into the boathouse. “We won’t find that treasure standing around and staring.”

“Is that old canoe ours?” asked Kim.

“Of course it is,” answered Erin. “Don’t you remember what Dad said? Anything in here is ours, including Annabelle’s treasure when we find it.”

For the next half hour they searched the boathouse from top to bottom but couldn’t find anything. Inside the cabinet were more old tools but no treasure. Erin went over and sat down on one of the concrete blocks holding up the canoe. Kim came over and sat down next to her.

“Maybe it’s not here,” said Kim. “Maybe Annabelle took the treasure back a long time ago.”

“Then why would she leave the note?” asked Erin. She paused and thought about it for a moment. “Nope. I’m sure there is a treasure out here. We just haven’t found her hiding place yet. Remember how we almost gave up in the playroom?”

Kim nodded her head and then spun around, looking out the door of the boathouse. She heard a light scraping of pebbles on the shore. “What’s that?” she asked.

“Dad?” hollered Erin.

The movement stopped. There was nothing but silence now.

“Dad? Is that you out there?” Erin yelled a little louder this time. Now she was sure that her dad was out there playing a trick on them like he often did.

The two of them listened carefully but did not hear the scraping of the pebbles again.

“I’m scared, Erin,” said Kim, grabbing Erin’s arm.

“Come on,” whispered Erin. She stood up and started leading her sister toward the door.

Suddenly, there was a shuffling noise directly outside the door. Erin and Kim were so startled that they backed immediately away toward the rear of the boathouse. The door swung quickly shut and they heard the padlock click into place.

The girls rushed to the door and started pounding. “Let us out of here!”

The only sound they heard was the footsteps of someone quickly moving away from the boathouse toward the woods. Erin put her face to the narrow crack in the door, but she couldn’t get a good look at whoever had locked them in. For the next few minutes, the girls pounded and continued to yell. Finally, Kim began to cry.

“What are we going to do?” she asked, sitting down on the concrete blocks next to the canoe.

“Don’t worry,” consoled Erin. “Dad knows we’re down here. He’ll come and get us out when we don’t come home for lunch.”

Kim immediately felt better at the idea of a rescue. “But what do we do till he comes?” she asked. “Lunchtime isn’t for hours. I’m hungry! And who was that, anyway? Why did they lock us in here?”

“Let’s continue to look for the treasure,” suggested Erin, ignoring all of Kim’s questions. She pulled a candy bar she had been saving from her pocket and handed it to Kim. She didn’t have a single clue as to who locked the door and she felt a shiver go down her spine at the thought of some stranger lurking in the woods behind their new house.

All of a sudden, there was a scratching sound coming from the back of the boathouse. Erin spun around and stared into the dark shadows beyond the canoe.

Kim stopped eating the candy bar and huddled closer to her big sister. She had also heard the sound.

“What was that?”

“Kim, hand me your flashlight,” requested Erin. It wasn’t nearly as bright now that the door was closed. Erin shined the flashlight where she detected some movement near the cabinet on the rear wall. She slowly reached over and grabbed one of the canoe paddles, gripping it tightly in one hand while holding the flashlight in the other.

“Alright! Come out of there!” she yelled, swinging the light back and forth. The sound stopped as they both crept toward the cabinet. Erin raised the paddle high above her head, ready to hit anything that moved.

Suddenly, a small rabbit jumped out from right next to the cabinet. Erin and Kim were so startled that they both fell backwards onto the dirt floor of the boathouse, dropping both the flashlight and paddle with a loud clang. The rabbit took two more short hops toward them and sniffed the air. Erin reached out her hand toward the rabbit and it hopped over to her, peeking into her palm for a snack. She slowly picked up the soft brown bunny.

“Let me see him,” said Kim, getting up and dusting off her pants.

“Be careful,” cautioned Erin, holding it out for her to pet. “He seems friendly, but you never know.”

Erin had been one of the student caretakers of the many small animals kept at their old elementary school. She knew that even small animals could give you a nasty bite when they were scared.

Around the rabbit’s neck was a collar with a tag on it.

“Kim, shine the light on this tag for me.”

The name ‘Sniffles’ was stamped on the faded leather. “Its name is Sniffles,” she said reading the tag aloud to Kim.

“But how did it get in here?” asked Kim. “And is it a girl or boy?”

“I don’t know,” answered Erin, “Probably a boy. I’ll bet he came in when the door was open.”

They sat down on the blocks and continued to pet the soft, brown bunny.

“Do you think Mom and Dad will let us keep him?” asked Kim, putting the bunny down on the floor.

“I don’t know,” answered Erin, “They will probably make us give him back to the person who owns him. He does have a collar, you know.”

“I know that,” said Kim, “but what if he doesn’t have an owner anymore. Or what if the owner is dead?”

“Then I guess Mom and Dad will just have to let us keep him,” Erin replied. It seemed as if Kim was always going to extremes when she thought about something.

Sniffles hopped over to the cabinet and snuggled himself along its side. One moment he was standing right next to the cabinet and in the next moment he was gone.

“Where did he go?” asked Kim, getting up and crossing the room.

Erin came over next to her and knelt down. There was a small hole toward the back of the cabinet in the wall.

“Sniffles!” yelled Kim, but there was no sound.

“Give me a hand,” commanded Erin.

She reached down and yanked on the side of the cabinet, attempting to pull it away from the wall. Kim reached in and pulled along with her. The cabinet groaned and swung away from the wall. It was attached by three large hinges.

Behind the cabinet were some steps leading down into a long, narrow tunnel. Kim aimed the flashlight into the tunnel.

It looked as if it went on for quite a distance and then curved slowly until they couldn't see anything.

“Sniffles!” called Kim.

Again, there was no sound except the hollow echo of her voice bouncing off of the stone walls and floor.

“I think we found where Annabelle hid the treasure,” declared Erin. She got up off her knees and stepped into the tunnel. “Let's get moving.”

“Where?” asked Kim.

“To find the treasure,” answered Erin, stepping further into the tunnel entrance and down the four steps. She stopped and turned around to look back at Kim.

“Are you coming?” she asked.

Kim shrugged her shoulders and stepped into the tunnel hesitantly after Erin. She grabbed ahold of Erin's hand and the two of them started off to hunt for the treasure.



# Chapter 6 Discussion Questions

## **K – 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade**

If you heard a scary sound, what would you do?

What do you think is in the secret tunnel?

## **3 & 4<sup>th</sup> Grade**

Why do you think the girls were scared of the rabbit?

Make an inference: Who (or what) do you think locked the girls in the boathouse?

## **5 & 6<sup>th</sup> Grade**

What do you predict the girls will find in the tunnel?

Map the girls' emotions throughout the chapter. How do you think the girls feel heading into the tunnel?

# Chapter 7

## The Dark Tunnel

The tunnel became darker and darker as the two girls moved closer to the curve. Kim huddled next to Erin, gripping her hand tighter with every step.

“Ouch!” cried Erin, wincing in pain. She pulled her hand away.

Her yell echoed loudly, bouncing back and forth in a deafening roar. The eerie sound of the echo frightened Kim even more, causing her to huddle closer. They stood there quietly until the sound died away.

Just around the curve they could hear the soft sound of something moving.

“What is that?” asked Kim, her eyes wide with fear.

“It’s probably just Sniffles,” answered Erin, trying to make her voice sound as convincing as she could. She really wasn’t too sure what was making the sound, but it definitely was

something alive. And it seemed to be moving away, leading them deeper and deeper along the path.

Taking the flashlight from Kim, Erin shifted forward. “Come on.”

Speeding up their pace, they followed after the sound. “He’s getting away!”

Kim grabbed a hold of Erin’s shirt, following closely behind her sister. When they rounded the curve, Erin stopped and flashed the light down the tunnel. Kim peered around her shoulder.

They could see that the tunnel continued on for quite some distance. Tapping on Erin’s shoulder, Kim excitedly pointed to a spot on the tunnel wall about fifteen feet ahead of them.

“Look!” she exclaimed.

There on the wall was an ‘A’ carved into the stone in the same beautiful script that they had found on the door of Annabelle’s playroom. “That proves it,” she whispered. “This tunnel has got to be Annabelle’s hiding place. There’s her ‘A’ just like on the playroom door!”

In the excitement of the moment, Kim forgot her fear and rushed toward the end of the tunnel. Erin followed close behind. It only took a moment before they arrived at an old, wooden door blocking the end of the tunnel. There was a small hole along the bottom edge where Sniffles had obviously squeezed through.

“I bet both the treasure and Sniffles are right behind this door,” declared Erin. She reached up to pull down on the brass handle. There were cobwebs on it and she brushed them away.

“See,” she said, wiping her hands on her pants, “these spider webs prove that nobody has come through this door in a long time.” She pulled down hard on the handle but the door wouldn’t budge.

“It’s locked tight!” she said, unable to hide the disappointment in her voice. She stepped away from the door and leaned against the wall, planning their next move.

Kim examined the handle closely. It was shiny brass with a beautiful floral design imprinted on it. Below the handle was a large keyhole with a little metal cover. Kim swung the cover

back and tried to see what was on the other side of the door, but it was too dark.

“Take a look at this!” she squealed. “This keyhole is just like the one on the boathouse lock!”

Erin took the key from her pocket and slid it into the lock. It fit perfectly. When she turned the key, the lock made a loud clicking sound as it opened the tumblers. Now the brass handle easily turned, allowing the door to swing inward. Behind it was a large room and there, in the middle of the room, was Sniffles staring back at them.

“Sniffles!” exclaimed Erin, rushing over and scooping him up.

The rabbit buried his nose in her jacket, wiggling himself under her coat. He quickly twirled around and poked his nose back out of the zippered opening.

“He must be cold,” said Kim, reaching up and tickling Sniffles’ nose. He wiggled his whiskers and then jerked his head back into the coat. The movement of the bunny tickled Erin and she giggled.

“Where are we?” Kim looked around the room. There were shelves surrounding them, all with large boxes neatly

stacked. In one corner was a furnace and a water heater with a brick chimney. In another corner was a washing machine and dryer with an ironing board set up on the side. On the ironing board was an iron, plugged into a socket high above on the ceiling.

Erin walked over to the ironing board and held out her hand. She could feel the heat rising from the iron. “It’s still hot,” she whispered. “This is someone’s house!”

“Whose house is it?” asked Kim, walking over.

“I don’t know,” Erin answered. “Let’s look and see if we can figure it out.”

For the next few minutes the two of them searched the basement. They could not find anything that revealed who owned the house or where they were. Next to the tunnel door was a set of stairs leading up to the first floor of the building.

“I guess we just have to go on up,” said Erin, reaching for Kim’s hand.

Kim jerked her hand from Erin’s, backing away toward the tunnel door. “No way,” she whispered shaking her head. “I want to go back to the boathouse and wait for Mom and Dad to come and get us.”

“Don’t be silly,” said Erin, starting up the stairs. “We can just explain to whoever lives here what happened. And then we can go home from here.”

“Oh yeah? And what if the person who lives here is the one who locked us in? Then what do we do?”

Erin stopped and turned around. She hadn’t thought of that. She started back down the stairs, but before she reached the bottom, the door at the top flew open with a bang.

“Who’s down there?”

A woman’s voice startled the girls. The bright light at the top of the stairs framed the woman in a dark shadow, concealing her identity.

Erin quickly rushed down the remaining steps and grabbed Kim’s hand. Just as the basement lights turned on, she pulled Kim behind some shelves in a dark corner of the basement. They could hear the footsteps of the woman coming down.

When she reached the final step, Erin and Kim peeked out at her from behind a cardboard box on the shelf.

“Look!” whispered Kim.

A chill ran down Erin's spine when she recognized the old woman from the house next door – the woman from the window. She held out a broom in front of her for protection.

Kim began to cry softly. She squeezed Erin's hand.

“I know you're back there,” said the old woman sharply. “Come on out from behind those boxes.”

The two girls leaned back into the corner as far as they could. Erin looked toward the door of the tunnel and tried to figure how she and Kim could get past the old woman and through it without getting caught. It seemed like an impossible task, but it was their only chance for an escape.

The woman stepped off the stairs and started walking in their direction. Kim let out a wail and began to sob. Just as Erin had decided it was time to make their move, Sniffles jumped out from under her coat.

“Sniffles! Come back here!” hissed Erin.

She let go of Kim and sprang out from their corner hiding place in an attempt to recapture the rabbit. As her hands encircled Sniffles, she tripped and fell to the basement floor. Sniffles wiggled free and scampered to the other side of the basement. Erin gasped and looked up. The woman, holding a



broom high above her head, towered over her. The woman's hands twitched, poised and ready to strike Erin.

Kim shrieked and dove in front of her sister. "Nooo!"

# Chapter 7 Discussion Questions

## **K – 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade**

What do you think will happen next?

Do you think the old woman is nice or mean?

## **3 & 4<sup>th</sup> Grade**

What do you predict will happen next in the story?

What in the basement gives the girls a clue that someone lives there?

## **5 & 6<sup>th</sup> Grade**

How do you think the old woman is feeling in this moment? How are her feelings similar or different from the girls?

Kim shows loyalty to her sister at the end of this chapter. What does she do to support her sister?

# 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 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade**

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

What is the old woman like?

## **3 & 4<sup>th</sup> 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 & 6<sup>th</sup> 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?

# Chapter 9

## The Plan

“Miss Peterson must be Annabelle!” exclaimed Erin. She took the handkerchief from Kim and closely examined the embroidered letter. The stitching was beautifully handmade, and it was a perfect match to the ‘A’ carved on the door of the playroom and the tunnel wall.

Kim stepped off the porch and started down the back path toward the gate that separated Annabelle’s backyard from theirs. “I’ve had it!”

“Where are you going?” shouted Erin. She stood up but didn’t follow her sister.

“I’m going back over there to ask her,” Kim answered over her shoulder. She continued on without stopping until she reached the gate.

Erin thought about it for a moment and then stepped off the porch to follow. Kim saw her following, so she waited at the gate for her. By the time Erin reached Kim’s side, she



began to have second thoughts. “Wait a minute, Kim,” she said, reaching up and holding the gate shut.

“What?” The irritation in Kim’s voice came through loud and clear. She had made up her mind to confront the old woman one way or another, and she was upset that Erin wasn’t letting her get her way.

Erin chose her words carefully. She wanted to be sure about a few things that bothered her before they confronted Miss Peterson. “How do you know we can trust her?”

Kim stopped pulling on the gate and looked up. “What do you mean?”

“If she really *is* Annabelle, then why didn’t she say so when she had the chance? You blabbed out her name right in front of her in the basement.” Erin paused just long enough to take a breath and then continued before Kim could comment. “And who was the one who locked us in the boathouse? It could have been her, you know.”

“Well, then what should we do?”

Erin bit her lower lip and stared intently at her sister. Kim knew that look well. Erin usually only bit her lower lip like that when she was about to spring one of her elaborate (and often

crazy) ideas on her. “I’ve got a foolproof plan that will catch the person who locked the boathouse door on us! Then we will know for sure if it was Miss Peterson.”

“Oh no, not another one of your crazy ideas,” Kim groaned.

“But this one’s different!” Erin said excitedly. “Didn’t I say this one is foolproof!?”

“Like the foolproof plan you had to make us rich by raising frogs in the bathtub?” asked Kim. “Or the foolproof plan you had to stop Mom and Dad from moving to River’s End?”

Erin raised her hand to protest. “That one wasn’t my fault. The post office just refused to...”

Kim cut off Erin’s explanation and began listing some of the many failed plans Erin involved her in over the years.

“Enough! Enough!” exclaimed Erin. She bit down hard on her lower lip again. “Those plans were different. This one *can’t* fail.”

Kim shrugged her shoulders and leaned her back against the fence post. She knew there was no stopping Erin when she got like this.

“Okay,” she finally said, “what’s the plan?”

Erin smiled and then quickly outlined what they would do after lunch to catch the person who locked them in the boathouse. Just as she was putting the finishing touches on the plan, Mom called from the back door telling them it was time for them to come in for lunch.

“What were you two doing out there by the fence when I called you?” asked Mom as they sat down at the table.

“Oh, nothing,” answered Kim, “just playing.”

The tricky part of Erin’s plan was that Mom and Dad wouldn’t find out about the tunnel until Erin and Kim had claimed the treasure.

“I thought you were going down to the river to play this morning,” Dad commented as they ate.

Erin looked across the table at Kim. She gave her the best ‘keep your mouth shut’ look and peered up at Dad. “We met the old woman who lives next door.”

“You did? Down by the river?” Dad stopped eating his sandwich and looked questioningly from one girl to the other.

Kim had one of those looks on her face that said she was hiding something, so Erin quickly distracted her dad. “No,

silly,” she said. “We met her at her house. She invited us to have some chocolate chip cookies and milk with her.”

“That’s amazing,” commented Dad. “The banker, Mr. Smith, told me she was a cranky, old recluse and had not left her house in many years.”

He looked over at Mom and shrugged his shoulders. “How in the world you two got invited into her house for some milk and cookies is beyond me.”

Mom looked disapprovingly at the girls. “The next time you are invited into anyone’s house you give us a call and ask permission first. You both know the rules!”

Erin knew they had made a mistake. Mom and Dad had told them countless times not to go into someone’s house without first asking permission. She could not think of a single thing to say, so she just lowered her head.

“We’re sorry. We won’t do it again.”

The rest of the meal was uneventful, and as soon as Kim and Erin were finished, they raced up to their bedroom and grabbed Erin’s cell phone from the bedside table. It was time to begin their plan. When everything was ready, they went out

the back door and started down the wooded path toward the boathouse.

After they had gone a short distance into the woods, Kim stopped and asked, “Are you sure this plan is going to work?”

“It can’t fail,” answered Erin. “We just have to be really quiet so that whoever is locking us in the boathouse doesn’t see us set my phone to record.” She patted her back pocket where she had tucked the phone.

Before they reached the final turn in the path, Erin stopped and held her finger to her lips to signal for Kim to be quiet. She stepped off of the path and started to move sideways through the woods toward the rear of the boathouse. Although the woods were thick here, it was not impossible for them to get through.

When they had reached the back of the boathouse, Erin quietly parted the few remaining bushes that were hiding them. It was a perfect spot for them to get a clear view of the door.

She climbed up to the first branch of a nearby tree.

Kim stayed below as Erin had instructed her to do. She was supposed to be the lookout. She didn’t see anyone, but

then again, she was too busy watching Erin climb up into the tree to be a good lookout in the first place.

Erin placed the cell phone on a tree branch and propped it against a couple of sticks she wedged into the bark. The phone was aimed at the boathouse door. She checked the angle one more time and then started recording. She gave Kim the ‘thumbs up’ sign and then carefully climbed back down.

“That’s it,” she whispered. “We’ve only got a couple of hours before the battery runs out, so we need to hurry.”

Kim nodded and the two of them retraced their footsteps back to the main path.

“Come on, Kim! Let’s explore the boathouse again,” she said loudly, as they emerged from the woods and headed toward the river front. “It’s a good thing Dad came down at lunch and let us out of there, or we would still be locked in!”

Erin hoped that if someone was listening, they would believe her little fib. She had no idea if someone was watching them or not, but she was not about to take any chances. That tunnel was their only escape.

Erin took the key from her pocket as they approached the boathouse door. She quickly unlocked the padlock and took a moment to glance around the area before entering. Although she couldn't see anybody watching them, she felt an eerie chill run down her spine.

“Come on, Kim. Let's get started!”

The girls entered the boathouse and walked toward the back wall. They immediately began to empty the cabinet and place the tools and equipment neatly on the floor in front of the doors.

From the corner of her eye, Erin thought she could see the bushes on the far side of the boathouse part ever so slightly, but she wasn't so sure. Unbeknownst to her and her sister, a pair of dark, sinister eyes peered at them until the girls were completely out of sight. After a short time, a person emerged from the woods and crept silently toward the side of the boathouse.

“Did you see anybody?” asked Erin after a short time.

“Nope,” answered Kim. She had just placed an old screwdriver on the floor. “How long do you suppose we will have to wait?”

“If I’m right, not long at all,” Erin whispered.

As soon as the words left her lips, the door to the boathouse swung shut with a bang, startling the two of them. “See!” exclaimed Erin. She got up and ran over to the door, just in time to hear the lock clicking shut.

“You let us out of here!” she screamed as she pounded on the door.

The only sound outside was a sinister laugh that sent shivers up her back and goosebumps down her arms. It was definitely a man’s laugh. Although terrified, Erin immediately felt reassured that the villain wasn’t Annabelle.

“I’m scared,” whispered Kim as she came over to Erin’s side. “Who would do a thing like that?” She had heard the laugh, too, and it was scary.

Erin held her finger to her lips and listened intently. There were no sounds coming from immediately outside the door. Further away, she could faintly hear the rustling of bushes as the man disappeared into the woods.

“I hope he didn’t see us put my cell phone up in the tree,” she whispered. “If he didn’t, then we’ll have a clear picture of him.”



Erin turned to Kim and led her back to the rear of the boathouse. “Come on,” she urged. “Give me a hand.”

Kicking the tools out of the way, she and Kim pulled the cabinet from the tunnel entrance.

“Let’s get out of here!” she said, stepping into the tunnel and turning on the flashlight.

The two of them went only a few feet before Erin went back into the boathouse and retrieved the screwdriver that Kim had laid on the floor. “For protection,” she whispered as she returned to Kim’s side.

# Chapter 9 Discussion Questions

## **K – 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade**

What do you think will happen in the tunnel this time?

If you were Erin and Kim, how would you feel going into the tunnel?

## **3 & 4<sup>th</sup> Grade**

Think about a time you were brave. How did you feel and act? Is that similar or different to how you feel Kim and Erin are thinking and acting in this chapter?

Make a prediction: Do you think the girls will figure out who locked them in the boathouse?

## **5 & 6<sup>th</sup> Grade**

The girls didn't tell anyone (including Miss Peterson) about their plan. Why do you think they kept their plan a secret?

Do you think the person who locked the girls in the boathouse knows about Erin's cell phone? Why or why not?

# Chapter 10

## The Discovery

The girls headed in the direction of Annabelle’s basement, continuing down the tunnel until they reached the spot on the wall beyond the bend where the ‘A’ was carved. At that point, they paused to inspect the wall and floor.

“Look,” whispered Erin, pointing down. The floor of the tunnel had been made up of huge, flat stones tightly fitted together.

Kim closely inspected the spot where Erin was shining the beam of light. There, the stones appeared to be a bit looser. A person could easily pry them up. It was all cleverly hidden, and only someone who was looking for something would even notice the difference. Someone had gone to great lengths to hide the fact that something was buried there.

“Could this be where the treasure is hidden? Should we dig it up now?” asked Kim. She knelt down next to the wall and pried at one of the stones. Even though it was looser than

the others, it was still pretty difficult to move. It had been there for a long time and the heavy stones had settled firmly in the damp earth. There was a thin layer of green moss covering each of the stones' surface.

“Let's do it,” Erin answered. She took the screwdriver and dug down, loosening the earth around the first stone. Then she took the screwdriver, wedged it under the stone, and pried it up. After prying for a few moments more, it finally gave way and popped free from the earth. It took both of the girls' strength to lift the stone and slide it to the side.

After nearly ten minutes, they had removed enough of the stones to reveal a small metal box buried in the soft sand beneath. Erin reached in and slowly tugged the metal box from its hiding place and onto the tunnel floor.

“Let's put the stones back just like we found them,” suggested Erin.

For the next few minutes, they busied themselves replacing the earth and the stones to look as undisturbed and as natural as possible. When they finished, they stood back and inspected their handiwork. Except for the missing moss, no one would guess that anyone had been digging in the area.

“Looks good enough to me,” said Erin, rubbing the dirt from her hands. “Come on. Let’s get going.”

“Wait!” Kim grabbed her sweatshirt. “Aren’t we going to open the treasure box?”

“Not here,” cautioned Erin. “Now that we know Annabelle wasn’t the one who locked us in the boathouse, we have to give this back to her.” She held up the treasure chest. “It’s hers you know.”

Even though Kim didn’t want to admit it, she nodded her head in agreement. “I guess you’re right.”

The girls continued down the tunnel and entered Annabelle’s basement. They quickly went up the steps and knocked on the basement door. Annabelle was surprised to find the two girls locked in the boathouse twice in the same day.

“My, my,” she exclaimed, “disturbing an old woman’s peace is becoming a habit with you two, isn’t it?” She stood there with her hands on her hips staring down at the girls. They could tell that she wasn’t really mad, although she was trying to make them believe that she was.

“You’re Annabelle,” accused Kim, pulling the old handkerchief out of her pocket and holding it up. “We have proof.”

“So what if I am,” answered Annabelle. “Anyway, what business is it of two young, cheeky girls?”

“What does cheeky mean?” asked Kim with her hands planted firmly on her hips.

“It means bold, sassy, or mischievous,” answered Annabelle, “which, at the moment, you are being.”

Kim smiled sheepishly and took a step back behind Erin.

Erin held up the treasure box. “We found your treasure.” She put the box down on the floor and pulled the note from her pocket. “We followed all of your clues in this note and dug up the treasure in the tunnel.”

“Treasure? Note?” Annabelle looked confused. “Let me see that.” She held out her hand and Erin placed the note in it.

After reading the note, once, and then again, she looked up at Erin and Kim. “I was a silly, young girl then,” she said. “I never put treasure in the boathouse all those years ago.”

“Then what is this?” asked Kim, picking up the treasure box from the floor and placing it gently on the kitchen counter. She tried to open it, but the box was locked and the clasp held tight.

“I’ve never seen that box before in my life,” answered Annabelle. “Where did you two find this?” She crossed the room and inspected the box. It was old and solidly built. She rubbed the dirt off the top. Under the layer of grime was a hand-painted ‘A,’ just like the others.

“See!” exclaimed Erin. “It has the same ‘A’ that was carved on the door of the playroom, the wall of the tunnel, and your handkerchief! It has to be your treasure.”

Annabelle closely studied the ‘A’ and nodded her head. It was identical to all of the monograms that she had seen throughout her life. “You’re right,” she finally said. “It is identical to all of the other letters from my past, but those letters were made by my father. Not me. I did not bury any treasure all those years ago.” She paused for a moment and then added, “He must have buried it there before he went on his trip to Europe.”

“But what about the money we found up in the playroom?” asked Kim. “And Kristina’s tea set?”

When Kim said Kristina’s name, tears formed in the corners of Annabelle’s eyes. They could tell that even after all these years, Kristina’s death still bothered her.

“I couldn’t take that money with me,” Annabelle said, looking down at the floor. “It was the money that Kristina and I were saving to take a trip to Europe to try and find my father. We had been planning the trip since we were very young and that money was as much hers as it was mine. I just couldn’t take it and use it for myself, so I left it for someone else to discover.”

She suddenly felt overcome by all the emotions forced to the surface and started to cry. Both Erin and Kim walked over to her and gave her a hug. When she finally composed herself, she looked at the two girls and squeezed each of their hands.

“Thank you for letting an old, silly woman cry,” she said wiping her eyes. She picked up the box and shook it for a moment. The box wasn’t very heavy and whatever was inside didn’t make much sound.



“What do you think is in there?” asked Erin. “Maybe this will open it.” She took the boathouse key from her pocket and handed it to Annabelle.

Annabelle took the key and turned it slowly over in her hand. “I haven’t seen this old key for many years.” She tried it in the keyhole, but it didn’t fit. The hole on the chest was much too small for the boathouse key to fit. Handing the key back to Erin, she took the screwdriver. “I’ll get it open.”

It only took one good twist to release the latch. The lid flew back and the three of them stared at the contents of the box.

“What is this stuff?” asked Kim, reaching in and pulling out some official-looking papers. They were large sheets of paper with writing all over them and a beautiful, floral border around the edge. “What do these say, Erin?”

Erin tried to read the words that were printed on the papers that Kim had handed her. “This certifies that John A. Peterson is the owner of one hundred thousand fully-paid and non-assessable shares of common stock...” She looked up in confusion. “What does all this mean, Miss Annabelle?”

“It means that my father had quite a bit of money,” she answered. “Girls, these are stock certificates of shares in a company. To put it simply, shares are small pieces of a company. Shares can be bought by people. When buying shares in a company, the buyer owns a small part of that company.” She shuffled through the papers to the bottom of the chest and pulled out a handful. “And they all belonged to my father.”

Erin took a couple of the stock certificates out of the chest and studied them closely. “Are these still good?” she asked. She was looking at the dates on all of them. “The dates on all of these are from a long time ago.”

“Well, they wouldn’t be dated any later,” Annabelle answered. “My father disappeared on a business trip to Europe a very long time ago.” She looked out the window beyond the two girls, sadly remembering the past.

Erin walked over to Annabelle and put her hand on top of Annabelle’s hand. She gently squeezed and smiled up at the old woman. She had no idea what it must have been like for Annabelle to lose her dad like that, but she was sure it must have been awful.

Annabelle looked down at Erin and sadly smiled. “Thank you for caring, young lady. I think about my father almost every day and wonder about how different my life might have been if he hadn’t disappeared that way.”

“Well...” Erin smiled. “Maybe we can help make your life a little different, or at least a little better. Would these stocks still be any good?”

“Why, I really don’t know,” sighed Annabelle. She wiped away a tear. “But we’re going to find out.”

She carefully folded four of the certificates and placed them in her purse. She put the remaining certificates back into the chest and then placed the chest in the cabinet under her kitchen sink. Patting her purse, she asked, “Do you suppose your parents will let you go to town with me to check these out? I’ll treat you to a nice ice cream fizz. I haven’t had a good ice cream fizz in many years.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever had an ice cream fizz,” said Kim, wrinkling her nose. “But, I *am* hungry.”

“Well then, it’s time you do.”

Annabelle led them into the parlor where she showed them the phone. Erin picked up the receiver and dialed her

mom's cell. When her mom answered, she was surprised to find that they were back at the old woman's house for the second time in one day.

“Where's your phone? And are you sure you aren't bothering that poor old woman?” she asked.

“In my room,” Erin said, glancing nervously at Kim at the mention of the cell phone. “But no, Mom, we're not bothering her. She wants us to come with her – for real! Please, can we go?”

Annabelle came over and took the phone from Erin. “This is Annabelle Peterson, your next-door neighbor. I think your children are just delightful and I would be pleased if they would accompany me to town for an ice cream fizz.”

To Erin, she sounded very convincing. Erin crossed her fingers and then held them up for Kim to see. Kim did the same.

“An ice cream what?” asked Mom.

“An ice cream fizz, of course,” answered Annabelle. “Haven't you people ever heard of ice cream fizzes where you come from?”

Laurie ignored the question. “Before I give permission to my girls to go with you, I’d like to come over and meet you.”

“I agree,” said Annabelle. “Can you come over right away?”

“Yes. I’ll be right over.”

The doorbell rang and the girls rushed to open it. Both Mom and Dad stood on the porch. Annabelle invited them in for coffee and cookies. After a pleasant conversation, Laurie and Jim gave permission for the girls to accompany Annabelle into town.

The moment Annabelle said goodbye and closed the front door, the girls gave each other a high-five.

“Yes!”

“Miss Peterson,” Erin said, “how come you didn’t tell our parents about the certificates?”

“No sense sharing if they don’t have any value!” she said. “Besides, this is our little secret.”

The girls winked back at Miss Annabelle and trailed behind her to the car.

Annabelle's car was a shiny blue and the interior was big and roomy. Erin and Kim slid into the back seat and put on their seat belts.

After they backed out of the driveway and started toward the heart of town, Erin looked over at Annabelle and asked, "Why didn't you hide the treasure like your note said?"

Annabelle thought for a moment. "I never ran away." She paused again, and then added, "I really had nowhere to go. My father was all the family I had left in this country. He told me once that I had an aunt who lived in England, but I still have no idea where she lived."

"What happened to your Mommy?" asked Kim, changing the topic.

"I never knew my mother. She died giving birth to me." Annabelle reached into her purse and pulled out her pocket book. She opened it and brought out an old picture. It was a picture of a young, beautiful woman with dark hair. The woman was wearing a long dress.

"Is this you?" asked Kim, holding the picture up to get a better look at it.

“No, she was my mother. Her name was Annabelle just like me.”

“But why did you leave all of those toys up in your playroom?” asked Erin.

“My, my,” said Annabelle. “You two are full of questions, aren’t you?”

“Yup,” said Erin with a huge grin. “My mom and dad say I’m a Nosey-Rosy!” Erin had always been proud of the fact that she was curious. She was the ‘Guess what?!’ person of the Lewis family.

Kim jutted out her lower lip, “Me too!”

“Well?” asked Erin again. “Why did you leave all your stuff up there?”

“I already told you that I had nowhere to go, so the Smiths took me in to live with them.” Annabelle paused and glanced back at the two girls to see if they were really interested. They seemed to be, so she continued. For the next few minutes she gave them a quick description of her life with the Smiths.

She told them how old Mr. Smith, the banker, had taken away her family home and moved his family into it, and how her bedroom was given to her stepbrother, Charles. She never

told anyone about the entrance to the secret playroom, and as far as she knew, nobody had ever discovered it. The old banker was the only one who lived in the home until his death some months ago.

“I would occasionally sneak up to my playroom. I even snuck some of my dolls out, but I was never able to get them all.”

“But he couldn’t just take away your home like that, could he?” asked Erin. She couldn’t understand how the old banker could be so cruel.

“He foreclosed on the mortgage,” answered Annabelle. “The bank owned the home, and when my father disappeared without leaving any money or a will, he just took it over and bought it for himself.”

“What does fore...closed mean?” asked Kim. She stumbled a little over the word.

“The bank lends you money to buy a house and you agree to pay them back little by little each month. If you can no longer make your payments, then the bank can take your house away from you.”



“Oh,” said Erin, her voice barely above a whisper. “Now I understand. Because your father disappeared, and you were young and didn’t have any money, the bank took your house away.” Erin paused for a moment, deep in thought, before continuing. “But your father had lots of money! What about all those certificates in the treasure chest?”

“A very good question,” said Annabelle, “and one we are about to have answered by my dear brother, Charles.” As she spoke, she parked the car in front of the bank.

“Wait a minute!” pleaded Erin. She tugged on Annabelle’s sleeve. “One more question.”

Annabelle stopped and sighed, looking at the girls.

“Why does our boathouse have a tunnel that leads to your basement?”

“You see, the house I live in now used to be the gardener’s house on my father’s estate,” she answered. “The tunnel was used as an easy access for the gardener to get between the house and the boathouse. After my father disappeared, no one lived in the gardener’s house until I purchased it many years later. I don’t think my adopted father even knew about the tunnel.”

“Does Charles know about all this?” inquired Erin.

“He was too young to know about it,” she answered. “He was only two years old when his family moved into my house.”

“But...” Erin started to ask another question, but Annabelle cut her off.

“Enough questions,” she said. “Let’s go find out about those certificates and then we’ll have some nice ice cream fizzes.”

This was just the moment Kim had been waiting for. “I am hungry,” she said with a grin.

# Chapter 10 Discussion Questions

## **K – 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade**

Why is Miss Annabelle taking the girls into town?

What is an “ice cream fizz”? What’s your favorite dessert?

## **3 & 4<sup>th</sup> Grade**

Do you think Miss Annabelle misses her friend Kristina? Why or why not?

Make a prediction: What do you think will happen at the bank?

## **5 & 6<sup>th</sup> Grade**

What is the significance of the certificates?

Kim and Erin could have kept the treasure a secret, but they decided to return it to Miss Annabelle. Share a moment where you did the right thing. How did you feel?

# Chapter 11

## The Banker

Everyone stared at them in disbelief when they entered the bank. Even though Annabelle seldom came to town, everyone in River's End knew who the old lady was. Kids often would dare each other to go up and ring her doorbell. There were rumors that she was a witch and that her house was haunted. None of this was true, of course, but sometimes the rumors got way out of hand.

The girl standing behind the bank window stared blankly as they approached. She was a little uncertain how to handle this unexpected customer standing before her.

“Don't just stand there with your mouth hanging open,” said Annabelle, “you'll catch flies.” She smiled down at the two girls and winked.

The girl closed her mouth and said, “I'm sorry, Mrs. Peterson. How may I help you?”

“It’s Miss Peterson,” Annabelle huffed, “and I would like to see my brother, Charles C. Smith.”

From behind the counter, Erin and Kim suddenly heard the echo of the same sinister laugh from the woods. The laugh sent a chill down their spines. The counter was too tall for Kim to see over, but Erin could see. And she looked just in time to watch a tall, thin man let out the same laugh again as he turned and walked directly toward them.

Charles sauntered up to the counter and held out his bony hand. “Annabelle, my dear sister,” he said with a sneer, “it is so good to see you out and about. My, my, you’re looking good for your age.”

His voice was cold and flat. He looked down at Erin and Kim and gave them an icy stare and a thin smile. “And who are these two beautiful children accompanying you today?”

Without waiting for a response, he turned and led the three of them into his private office. As they stepped through the threshold, he closed the door behind him.

“How have you been, Annie?” he asked, sitting down in a dark leather chair behind a huge, red oak desk. He knew that Annabelle didn’t like being called by the nickname his father

had given her, and even after all these years, he couldn't resist taunting her.

“Just fine, Chuckie,” she snapped.

Charles sniffed indignantly and then shuffled some papers on the top of his desk. Scowling at Annabelle, he said, “Okay, enough of the pleasantries. What do you need?”

He shifted his gaze first to Erin and then to Kim. The piercing stare made them shudder. He was an extremely thin man with a narrow face, sunken eyes, and high cheek bones that made his head look like a skull with the skin stretched over it. The narrow mustache on his upper lip accented his thin mouth and made his face even more menacing, if that were possible. The top of his head was almost completely bald with a few strands of hair neatly combed to the side.

Out in the lobby, Erin had been able to quickly whisper to Kim that Mr. Smith was the same man that had locked them in the boathouse. She recognized his laugh immediately, but every time she tried to tell Annabelle who he was, he would purposely interrupt them.

“We’ve come to get your advice on these,” answered Annabelle, taking the four certificates from her purse. She reached out and offered the certificates to her step-brother.

Erin could no longer contain herself. “No, Miss Peterson!” she shouted, grabbing the certificates before Charles could take them. Sitting back down in her chair, she clutched the certificates closely to her chest.

“My goodness, child! That was rude!” Annabelle exclaimed. “Haven’t your parents taught you any manners?” She pulled the certificates out of Erin’s hands and handed them to her brother.

“I, I, I’m sorry, Miss Peterson...” stammered Erin, “but he’s... he’s the one who locked us in the boathouse!”

As she spoke, she pointed accusingly at the banker seated innocently behind the desk. He glanced over at Annabelle to see whether or not she would accept the story.

“What a terrible child,” he declared.

Staring at Erin and Kim, his upper lip raised into a nasty sneer. Annabelle didn’t notice the mean look that Charles gave the two children because she was still looking at Erin. “Wherever did you find such terrible little brats?” he asked.

“Miss Peterson! You’ve got to believe us!” exclaimed Kim. She stood up from her chair and pressed against her sister. The cruel glare from Mr. Smith had frightened her. “He’s the one who locked us in the boathouse, and we’ve got proof!”

“Proof? What proof?” Charles scoffed. “What on earth are these two children babbling about?”

The moment Kim had mentioned that they had proof, he suddenly became very interested. Leaning forward in his chair, he folded his bony fingers together and set them on the top of the desk. “Why in the world would I lock two children in a boathouse?” he asked innocently. “And what kind of proof do you have of this, young lady?”

“We don’t know why you would lock us in,” answered Kim, “but we’ve got a—ouch!!” Erin kicked her just before she had a chance to tell Mr. Smith about the cell phone.

“We might have been mistaken,” Erin quickly interrupted. Kim looked back at Erin with a questioning look on her face.

“You’ve got a what?” asked Mr. Smith in a sickly-sweet voice. Before she had a chance to answer, he pointed a bony



finger at Erin. And then looked directly at Kim and said, “You! Speak!”

To Erin’s relief, Kim remained silent. She had quickly realized that it would be a mistake to tell this man about the cell phone still hidden in the woods. He might get there before they did.

“Charles! Leave the children alone,” scolded Annabelle. She smiled at the two girls. “You’re frightening them. Now I’m sure there is some valid explanation why these girls would accuse you of being the scoundrel that locked them in the boathouse, and we will get to that. But right now, I want you to take care of those certificates for me.”

She winked at Erin and Kim, sending them some kind of a signal, but the two girls weren’t really sure what she was trying to tell them.

Erin felt a great relief that Annabelle had come to their rescue. She didn’t have a clue as to how she and Kim were going to get out of this mess. They had accused one of the richest and most important people in River’s End of being the one who had locked them in the boathouse. She wasn’t even

sure that their mom and dad would believe them without that video for proof.

“Now, what is the value of those stocks and bonds?” she heard Annabelle ask.

Charles studied the certificates that Annabelle had given him.

“If none of these have been replaced, then these are quite valuable,” he said after a few minutes of careful study. He took off his glasses and looked at Annabelle. “Where on earth did you find these?”

To Erin and Kim’s shock, Annabelle told Charles the whole story of how the girls had been locked in the boathouse and had discovered the chest. Erin and Kim looked at each other when she got to the part about finding the buried treasure, but Erin quickly gave Kim one of the best ‘keep your mouth shut’ looks that she could muster.

Annabelle told him that the girls found the chest buried in the floor of the boathouse. For some reason, she purposely omitted telling him about the tunnel that connected the boathouse to her home. She also conveniently omitted telling

him about the rest of the certificates still in the chest and safely hidden under her sink.

“How did these two get out of the boathouse after they had been locked in?” asked Charles. He had been listening intently to Annabelle’s story.

“Why I was on one of my daily walks, and I heard them yelling,” lied Annabelle. She quickly reached over and patted Erin on the back. “This little girl has quite a set of lungs on her.”

“Me too!” said Kim in a miffed voice. She let out a loud scream for help that immediately brought two tellers and the receptionist running to the office door.

“Get back to work,” snarled the startled Charles.

Erin giggled while Annabelle allowed herself a few snorts. The confusion caused by Kim’s yelling for help was quite funny.

“Little girl, you cannot do things like that in a bank or any other public place,” Mr. Smith scolded, shaking his finger at Kim. He glared at Annabelle and Erin laughed even harder when she saw the frustration on his face.

“I just wanted to show you that I can yell loudly, too,” said Kim quietly. Tears began to form in her eyes.

“And you sure proved that,” laughed Annabelle, giving Kim’s arm a squeeze and handing her a clean handkerchief.

The banker took the four certificates off of his desk and held them up in the air. “Would you mind if I held on to these for the time being, Annabelle?” he asked. “I would like to check them to make sure they are real.”

“You can make a copy of them,” answered Annabelle. “For the time being, I will hold on to them for safe-keeping.”

“My dear sister,” he said, “what could be safer than a bank?”

When Annabelle didn’t answer him, he shrugged. He picked up the phone and asked his secretary to come in and make the necessary photocopies.

“Were these all of the certificates?”

“Oh no,” answered Kim, and before Erin or Annabelle could stop her she added, “There are lots more...” Her voice trailed off when she saw the panic on Erin’s face.

“You know,” started Charles, pausing long enough to look as if he were deep in thought, “perhaps I should follow you

home and bring the rest of those certificates back here for safe keeping. I will put them in the vault this evening, and then I can tell you tomorrow exactly what they are worth.”

Annabelle shook her head. “Just let me know about these four certificates first, Charles. Then we will see about the rest.”

As she spoke, she held the four certificates up in the air for him to see one last time and then stuffed them into her purse. The banker looked longingly at them.

“If they are worth what I suspect they are worth,” she said, “I will bring the rest in for your inspection.”

Without waiting for an answer, she stood up, nodded curtly toward Charles, and shooed the girls out of his office. They quickly walked through the bank lobby and out the main doors. They were careful not to speak until they were well down the block and away from anyone overhearing them.

“Kim!” exclaimed Erin. “Why did you tell him about the rest of the treasure!?”

Kim stuck out her lower lip. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

Before Erin could say anything more, Annabelle broke up the argument. “I’m hungry for an ice cream fizz,” she said. “What about you?”

The three of them entered the corner drugstore and sat on round stools placed in front of a long counter. Erin and Kim twirled on the stools until a boy about Erin's age walked up with a pad of paper, ready to take their order. He had dark hair and dark brown eyes and stood about an inch taller than Erin. He smiled easily and joked around with Kim but avoided looking directly at Erin.

“Three root beer fizzes, please,” said Annabelle.

When the boy recognized her, he stepped back in total shock. He had never really seen the old Hidden Hollow Witch up close, and the fear of standing right in front of her made his voice crack.

“Three what?” he croaked.

“Three root beer fizzes!” She answered loud enough to startle the boy. “Doesn't anyone know what an ice cream fizz is around here? Get Mr. Blake out here this very instant!”

“Oh!” he exclaimed. “You mean an ice cream float! That's a large root beer with two scoops of vanilla ice cream in it.”

“That’s what I said—an ice cream fizz. And that’s three scoops,” corrected Annabelle. “Has Mr. Blake gotten cheap over the years?”

“Three scoops it is,” said the boy, walking off to get their order started. “And Mr. Blake doesn’t own this drugstore anymore. My dad, Matthew Collins Sr., bought it a few years ago.”

When he returned with their order, he smiled at Erin and asked, “Are you the people who bought the old Smith house?”

Erin nodded as she sipped on her soda. “Uh huh,” she said after she swallowed. “We just moved in.”

“I’m Matthew Collins Junior,” he said, wiping his hands on the sides of his jeans. He held out his hand for Erin. “But, please call me Matt.”

“I’m Erin Lewis and this is my sister, Kim,” she answered, taking his hand and shaking it.

“Are you going to go to River’s End Elementary and Middle School this fall?”

As Erin nodded he quickly added, “Me too. What grade will you be in?”

“Sixth grade. You?”

“Me too. So... I guess I’ll see you around.”

He shifted from one foot to the other, not really knowing what else to say. Finally, he took the pad of paper from his pocket, dropped the check on the counter in front of Annabelle, and went back to work.

“He’s nice,” said Kim, sipping the last of her drink.

Erin nodded and looked over at Annabelle. “Why didn’t you tell Mr. Smith about the tunnel?”

She had been wondering about that ever since they had left the bank, but Annabelle didn’t seem willing to talk about the bank incident, so Erin had waited for the right moment to ask.

“My, my. You are a curious little girl, aren’t you?” said Annabelle. She smiled over at Erin with a dreamy look in her eyes as she traveled back to her childhood. “I remember another little girl, just like you, many years ago.”

“Who was that, Miss Peterson?” The sound of Kim’s voice snapped her out of her daydream and back to the present.

“Why, you never mind,” she answered curtly. “That little girl was just a silly little girl who got into a lot of mischief by



being too curious.” She reached over and softly pinched Kim’s nose before adding, “Haven’t you heard? Curiosity killed the cat.”

“I’ll bet that silly girl was you, Miss Annabelle,” giggled Kim.

The three of them chuckled and then Erin asked again, “But why didn’t you tell him?”

Annabelle’s face got suddenly serious. “Because I learned a long time ago not to trust that man. His father was no good and he is just like his father. Charles will steal you blind if he gets a chance.”

“But why didn’t you want to tell him about the rest of the certificates in the chest? They all had your father’s name on them, so they have to belong to you. You’re rich, Miss Annabelle!”

Annabelle held up a finger to her lips, signaling the two girls to be quiet. She lowered her voice so that no one else could hear her.

“That’s just the point,” whispered Annabelle. “That man’s father told me that my real father cashed all of his stocks and bonds and sold his half of the business before he traveled

to Europe. He told me that when my father disappeared, he had all of his money with him. Something about he was going to make some big business deal or something like that and that he must have been killed for the money. He was never heard from again and they never found his body.”

“That’s really sad,” said Erin, gently touching Annabelle’s arm.

Annabelle lowered her voice to the point that Erin and Kim could barely hear her. “He also told me that he was letting me live with them out of the goodness of his heart and that thanks to my father changing everything he owned into cash, I was a penniless orphan.”

Erin looked thoughtfully at Annabelle and said, “Is that why you call yourself Miss Peterson instead of Miss Smith?”

“Yes,” answered Annabelle. “Although the Smiths adopted me, when I grew up, I decided to legally change my name back. I always knew I was a Peterson.”

# Chapter 11 Discussion Questions

## **K – 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade**

Who did the girls and Annabelle meet at the restaurant?

The boy at the store, Matt, is going into the same grade as Erin. Have you ever started school in a new place?

## **3 & 4<sup>th</sup> Grade**

Why is Erin mad at Kim after they leave the bank?

Annabelle says Charles will “steal you blind.” What do you think that means?

## **5 & 6<sup>th</sup> Grade**

Why do you think Annabelle wanted to keep the tunnel a secret from Charles?

What did Annabelle discover about her family and the Smith family at the end of the chapter? Why is this important?

# 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 – 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 & 4<sup>th</sup> 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 & 6<sup>th</sup> 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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