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about 2,866 words

Brenwood Bandit
by Kathryn Gailey

"The day that Emily Elis entered my office was one to remember. There was a chill in the air, a kind of electricity only felt the day of a storm. And a storm there was but not outside, no but one-" Owen was cut off by a hair band being shot at his face. It hit him square between the eyes causing him to drop his tape recorder.

"There is a storm, and Elvis will be lost forever if you don't start looking now." Emily stood her ground, she wore her yellow rain boots, a set of pigtails, and a determined look. She was sharp for a six-year-old.

Owen picked up the tape recorder. "Emily, you're ruining my flow." He picked up his backpack from the bottom bunk of the bunk bed and put it on. "There is a method to my madness I assure you." The ten-year-old repeated the line he'd once heard on a cop drama. "Now where was your teddy bear last seen?" Owen held the tape recorder out to her.

"I was playing near Brenwood Forest but I heard a weird sound and ran away. I dropped Elvis because I was so scared."

Owen nodded. "I see, and can you describe the sound?"

"Like if a cat tried to yodel."

"Could you give me an example?"

"No, it was weird."

"Okay, I'll see what I can do." Owen put on his detective hat which was a brown fedora and he turned back to Emily as if

putting on a play. "You go home. I'll look for your bear and I'm sure to have him back in your hands before dusk."

"No, you've got to find him before dark."

"That's what I-" Owen sighed. "Okay, as you wish."

"And I want to come too."

"No, you can't."

Emily stood her ground. She placed both her hands on her hips in defiance. "And why not?"

"Because you're a little kid." Owen walked toward his bedroom door.

"Come on Owen, I can color inside the lines and tie my shoes. I'm not in preschool anymore." Emily said.

But Owen shook his head, "No, I can't let you go out there in the woods. What if you scraped your knee? You'll slow me down."

"I will not."

"Owen turned to meet her gaze, Emily clearly wasn't backing down. She had that last juice box kind of look on her face. Owen didn't want to mess with it, so he had only one choice. He ran.

Owen bolted out the door of his bedroom and Emily hurried after him. But it was no use, by the time she got to the front door Owen was already on his bike.

"Owen Conner!" she yelled. "I'll get you for this!"

Owen laughed and said to himself, "Not if you can't catch me." Emily only had a big wheel it would take her ages to get to Brenwood and by then he will have found Elvis.

When Owen got to Brenwood he had a sickening feeling in his gut, the edge of the forest jutted out like a wall of dark trees. It was so thick in fact that it was here at the entrance that he had to part ways with his bike. Owen leaned the red bicycle against a nearby tree, hoping that no one would take his baby while he was in the forest.

The woods were filled to the brim with brambles, and his Swiss Army knife was only doing so much. It didn't take long for Owen's foot to get caught in a bush.

He was painstakingly detangling the briars when he heard it. A giggle. A female giggle coming from behind him.

Owen whirled around to be faced with- "Emily?"

Emily stood in Owen's own forged pathway with a small hand-held pair of garden clippers. "I asked my mom for a ride and these were in the garage. I have been pricked by those bushes too many times to forget them."

"You need to go home."

"No, you need me and my plant scissors." She gestured to his captured leg. "It will take too long without my help."

"Fine," Owen grumbled.

It took two snips and Owen was free. He removed his foot from the middle of the bush. He squinted at it. "That's weird." He bent down plunging an arm deep into the vine-y mess his leg had been trapped in moments before.

"What is?" Emily looked over his shoulder.

Owen pulled his hand back to the surface clutching a pair of teddy bear sized sunglasses.

Emily steps back and gasps. "Those are Elvis's; he was wearing them yesterday."

Owen pulled a set of tweezers out of his pocket. "I'm more concerned with this." He said plucking a tuft of red hair stuck in one of the sunglasses latches.

"Well what is it?" Emily asked as she tried to get a closer look at the mystery hair.

Owen handed her the sunglasses and pulled a magnifying glass from his back pocket. He held the mystery hair into the light. "It's fox hair."

"How do you know?"

"I have a nature book and there's a lot of foxes out here."

Emily nodded. "What do we do?"

Owen dropped the fox hair into a plastic bag which he sealed and stuck in his backpack. "We've got to follow the trail."

"What trail?" Emily asked. "I don't see anything."

"Well you have to look harder." Owen bent down to examine the forest floor. He ran his fingers over the dirt like expert hunters do in the movies.

"How? It's too dark in here." Emily did have a point; the foliage wasn't only dense on the ground but at treetop level too. The branches blocked out most of the light except for a few scattered rays that managed to sneak their way in. Seeing the forest floor, much less animal tracks, was impossible.

Well, it was until Owen pulled his flashlight out of his backpack. He smiled. "A detective's got to be prepared." He shined the light on the forest floor searching for a set of tracks. "If we find the tracks then they could lead us back to their nest."

Emily nodded. "And if we don't find the tracks."

Owen stopped looking and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"You don't want to know."

Emily gulped. "What are we looking for?"

"Paw prints with claws. Bigger than a cat but smaller than a dog." Owen swept his flashlight over a new spread of ground. He back tracked. "I found a trail!"

Emily, who had been looking a few feet away hurried to his side.

"See, this is what a fox print looks like."

"How can you be sure?"

"I can't. But it's the first and closest set of prints we've found." He looked to Emily. "It's all we've got."

Emily frowned but nodded. "Okay let's do this."

The pair plunged further and further into the forest guided by the glow of a flashlight and a set of fox tracks. They wound around trees and through a maze brush and forestry. The path of a fox was apparently a winding one.

"Why hasn't this led us back to the nest yet?" Emily whined. Her feet hurt, and they only had a few hours left. The clock was ticking.

"Maybe these prints were from when it was hunting. Maybe foxes don't go home till bedtime."

"Maybe?" Emily frowned wrinkling her nose. "I can't work with maybes, Owen. I need Elvis back. I was a wreck last night. Do you see these eye bags?"

Owen stopped in his tracks. He whirled around to her shining the flashlight in her face. "Nope." He turned back to the trail.

"Ow! That hurt." Emily grumbled, rubbing her eyes.

"If you want to come along then you got to act like a big kid. If you can't then go back home." Owen said.

"Go back home? Do you see how far we are now? I'd be lost without your forest expertise."

"Forest expertise...right I have those."

"Owen." Emily warned. "I gave you my Halloween candy for this, all of it." She gestured widely to show just how much all of it truly was. "I gave you that because you're an expert detective."

"Which I am."

"An expert detective, that knows how to navigate the forest."

"Now, that wasn't in the agreement."

"What?" Emily freaked. She stopped grasping her head in her hands. "I cannot believe you would lead me deep into the woods like this, and you don't even have bread crumbs!"

"Well, bread crumbs don't actually work because the animals would-"

"It doesn't matter because we're dead anyway."

"No, we aren't." Owen attempted to sooth her.

But, Emily could not be soothed she was in full panic mode. "We're stuck out here, and Elvis is in some hole getting his face chewed on." Tears welled up in her eyes. "And it's just not fair!" Emily stomped her foot and her yellow rubber rain boot cracked through a hard surface, like stepping on an egg. Whatever it was crunched, and a humming sound erupted through the air.

A whole swarm of bees rushed out of the hive and Emily and Owen shrieked. They ran down the sort of trail and through bramble and brush, but regardless the bees persisted.

Owen held tight to Emily's hand, pulling her along as the tears leaked from her eyes. The pair ran down a hill and that was when Owen found his left leg sunk up to his knee in water, a creek to be exact.

He made a split-second decision. Was it the best one? Probably not. Was the ending result favorable? The jury is still out. But, did Owen have any other ideas? Nope, none whatsoever. He took Emily by their joined hands and hurled her and himself into the water of the creek bed.

The instant Emily hit the water she wondered if Elvis was really worth it. The water was icy cold, and she knew she'd be out sick before the week was up.

They stayed under for a few moments while the bees passed and then they sat up. "Wow, I can't believe that works in real life." Owen said.

"What was that?" Emily asked.

"I said that I can't believe it worked. I saw it on Tom and Jerry."

"You just guessed!" Emily stood up she was dripping wet and her rain boots held a fish tank's worth of water. "I just can't believe you!" She stalked to the shore and sat down yanking off a boot.

Owen followed. "Well, yeah I did guess, but look it worked so we'll be fine."

"Owen. That kind of stuff will get you messed up."

"Messed up?"

"Yeah, you got to be careful. My mom says that I should look before I leap. I think you would benefit from that."

"But it's my quick thinking that saved us."

"This time." Emily warned. She sighed and stuck her boot back on. She pulled the other water-logged boot off. "What are we going to do? We lost the trail."

Owen sighed, running a hand through his wet hair. "I don't kn-" He stopped mid-sentence and looked across the creek. He stood up and waded through the water to the other side. There he pulled a biodegradable, nonfat, vegan, no gluten, no fun granola bar wrapper out of the wet soil, and stuck to it was a tuft of red fur. He held it up to the light of his flashlight. "Hey Emily, remind me again what that sound you heard was."

"Well it sounded like a cat yodeling."

Owen turned to her, grinning. "I know where he is."

"Do you know how to get there?"

"Owen shined his flashlight on the wet soil where a distinct foot print stood proudly. "Yeah, I do."

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When Emily crawled into the back of her mother's minivan looking much like a drowned rat she knew that there would be questions. But she hadn't realized just how many...

The interrogation had started out easy with a classic "So, did you two have fun?" But it escalated quickly to "So why are you two soaking wet?"

Owen was smooth as ever and evaded the whole truth with a flare that was suspiciously good. "We were playing in the creek."

Mrs. Elis wasn't having any of it. Her eyes narrowed in the rearview mirror and she asked, "Who pushed who?"

"No one pushed anyone-" Owen started.

But Emily wasn't as strong as him when it came to lying and the bubble of truth seemed to pop in her chest. She quickly exhaled the statement. "We weren't playing in the creek at all though! We were running and Owen went in and pulled me along after him!"

Owen's hand came in contact with her mouth and he sent her a warning glare. "What she means is that I tripped."

"I see." Mrs. Elis stopped the car at the front of the neighborhood. "And why were you running in the woods?"

Emily froze. There was no non-incriminating answer to the question.

Owen must've had the same thought because instead of answering it he simply slid open the van door and climbed out. "Thank you so much for the ride Mrs. Elis."

Emily nodded. "Thank you, mommy."

The mini-van's sliding door shut with a slam, and the van drove off. Emily Elis and Owen Connor were left standing in the middle of the road. They were now back in their neighborhood and Emily was defiantly confused. Owen led her up the driveway of a one floor house with a two-car garage. And, it was this very garage that Owen headed straight for. The garage door was slightly opened, and a sound was coming from inside that could only be described as a yodeling cat.

"The cat?" Emily asked.

Owen shook his head. "Indie rock band." He lifted the door to reveal a hipster teenager who was nodding his head to the music. The teen was working on an abstract sculpture. On the nearby workbench sat a basket with orange fluff which he periodically pulled from and glued on to it. Said fluff clung to his clothes. On the floor was a pile of garbage, clearly salvaged from Brenwood and in said junk, sat Elvis the bear.

"Hello, I am Owen Conner, Private Eye." Owen held out his hand to the teen.

The teenager looked at it and grimaced. "Whatever."

Emily stepped up. "Um, that's my bear in your pile." She pointed to the junk.

The teen looked at the pile and shrugged. "So?"

"So, could I have him back?"

Thunder rolled in the atmosphere, and Emily and Owen turned to see it getting darker. Huge, gray storm clouds filled the sky the bottom would fall out any minute now. The pair exchanged glances.

The teen seemed to be ignoring the question because he neither responded or reacted. Owen frowned, rubbing his chin. "You don't want to give in so easily, huh? Well," he stuck his arm in his backpack. "How about a trade?"

The teen stopped mid-gluing and turned. "I'm listening."

"You can have this book." Owen pulled his nature book out of the backpack. "In exchange for the bear."

"And why would I need some crummy forest book?" The teen asked.

"Because," Owen flipped through the pages. "It's got stuff to help with tracking animals and even a bit about what plants are safe to eat."

The teen froze. "Safe to eat?" He looked hypnotized, something Owen had counted on.

"Yes." He flipped the pages. "There's all sorts of stuff about different types of plants and their health benefits."

"I-I see."

"Do we have a deal?" Owen persisted.

The teen hesitated.

Emily looked between the two. "Are you-"

That was when the bottom fell out. Rain soaked into the sidewalk and roads alike. Everything was wet almost immediately. The teen grinned. He snatched the book out of Owen's hands and then tossed the bear to Emily. She caught Elvis and hugged him to her chest. "Sure, we have a deal. But, good luck getting it home in one piece."

Owen and Emily made eye contact. "What are we going to do?" she asked him.

He frowned. "First off, put him in here." He gestured to his backpack.

Emily handed him over. "That will not do any good in this kind of storm."

Owen nodded. "You're right." He plunged his hand deep into the backpack. "It's a good thing I've got this." Owen pulled a collapsible umbrella out of his backpack. He wasn't one for smugness, but watching the teenager turn a bold shade of red was his favorite part of the day thus far.

The teen struggled for words, so mad that he hadn't successfully foiled the kids' mission. "That's not-"

"But it is, don't be a meany." Owen said.

Emily gasped. "Language."

Owen nodded. "Of course. I'm sorry, but these big kids boil my blood."

And with that the pair walked down the street in the pouring rain, leaving a tomato faced teenager in their wake.