

Where's Emma?

By Lisa Hall Deckert

The fire crackled as the top log burned through and the two ends tumbled into the flames. A small geyser of sparks illuminated the faces of the three teenage girls sitting around the fire.

"Kara, your marshmallow is on fire," Kirsty pointed out.

Kara tried to snatch it back but before she could, the flame engulfed the marshmallow and it fell into the fire. "Well, that's two I've torched."

"Don't worry," Denali assured her. "We have a whole bag." She withdrew her toasted marshmallow from the stick and squeezed the warm goo between two graham crackers along with a piece of chocolate. "I'm really glad we were able to take this last camping trip before school starts next week."

"Yeah, fun hike today," Kirsty said, "even if it was muddy. The terrain was difficult, but the view from the top was incredible."

"At least it didn't rain on us," Kara said.

"Hello." The small voice came from behind them.

The three girls looked around. A girl about six or seven years old stood at the edge of their campsite, firelight reflecting off her shiny pink boots and rain jacket in the evening light. Her blond hair was gathered into two bunches over her ears.

"Hi," Kirsty said in a friendly voice. "I'm Kirsty and this is Denali and Kara."

"I'm Emma," said the little girl, a hopeful expression on her face. "Are you making s'mores?"

Kara smiled. "Yes we are. Would you like one?"

Emma nodded eagerly.

"Where's your mom?" Kara asked.

Emma pointed to a nearby campsite. A woman stood near the picnic table there, arms crossed, watching.

"Go ask her if it is okay if you make a s'more with us," Kara told her.

Emma turned and trotted away. A few minutes later she was back, leading her mom by the hand. "Mom says it's okay."

"Hello, I'm Heather. Are you sure it's all right for Emma to make a s'more with you?" Emma's mom asked.

"Sure, we have plenty for both of you," Kirsty assured her.

"Thanks; I believe I'll pass," Heather said. "But if it is okay with you I'll leave Emma here while I take a quick shower at the bathhouse."

"That's fine," Denali said. "Emma will be okay with us."

Emma was already making her way toward the bag of marshmallows on the picnic table.

"Here, you can use my stick," Denali told her. She helped Emma impale the marshmallow onto the stick. "Just hold the marshmallow right above the flame, not too close."

"I know, I've done it lots of times," Emma said impatiently. She expertly positioned her marshmallow over the fire.

"I like your raincoat," Kara told Emma.

Emma beamed. "It's a Barbie coat. I have my Barbie backpack in the tent. It's pink too, 'cause pink is my most favorite color. I'm going to take it with me onto the airplane tomorrow."

"Wow, where are you flying?" Kirsty asked.

"I'm going back home to my Dad's house. I start second grade next week," Emma explained.

"Where does your dad live?" Denali asked.

"In Phoenix. My dog lives there too. And Mandy. She's nice."

"What is your dog's name?" Kirsty asked.

"Hercules. He's a pug and he has a curly tail and sometimes he passes gas and gets all stinky and then Daddy says to put him in the back yard. Your marshmallow is too close to the fire," she told Kara.

Kara pulled the marshmallow away just before it ignited. "Thanks. Hopefully I can toast this one without burning it."

"If you want me to, I'll cook one for you after I finish mine," Emma offered.

By the time Emma's mother returned with her hair wrapped in a towel, they had all successfully assembled and devoured their s'mores and learned all about Emma's dog and her friends and the playground at her school. "Thank you for watching Emma," Heather said. "We'd better turn in. What do you say, Emma?"

"Thank you," Emma sang out. "Goodnight."

After Emma left, the three girls talked and laughed around the campfire. "Look, a shooting star," Kara said. "Make a wish."

They closed their eyes and wished. Kirsty sighed. "You know summer's almost over when it gets dark enough to see the stars."

"And it's barely eleven," Denali said. "Just two months ago it never got completely dark at night." She yawned. "I think I'm ready for bed."

The other girls agreed. They doused the campfire and crawled into their sleeping bags. After their active day, they were almost instantly asleep.

Sometime later, a noise woke Denali. It sounded like a car door. She picked up her cell phone and checked the time – 2:42. A minute later she heard a car engine start up and two more door slams. The car drove away. Denali considered a trip to the bathroom, but the bathhouse was on the other side of the campground and her sleeping bag was warm. She decided she could wait until morning.

When a chattering squirrel woke Denali in the morning, she could no longer put off her visit to the bathhouse. She shoved her feet into sneakers, pulled on her jacket, and trudged across the campground.

As Denali returned to her campsite, she heard a voice calling out.

"Emma! Emma where are you?" There was a note of panic in the voice. "Emma, come here this minute!"

Denali approached Heather. "What's wrong?"

"Emma's missing. When I woke up this morning, she was gone. I can't find her anywhere."

"Have you checked the bathhouse?" Denali asked.

“Of course. I’ve checked everywhere. She’s not here.”

“I’ll get my friends up and we’ll look for her. She must be around here somewhere,” Denali said.

“I’m calling the troopers.” Heather turned and hurried into her tent.

Denali woke Kirsty and Kara. They dressed rapidly and began exploring the trails leading away from the campground. There was no sign of Emma on any of the trails close to the camp. They followed one of the main trails downhill, calling for Emma as they went. After about twenty minutes of hiking, Kirsty spotted something.

“Look over by the creek. There is something white right next to the water.”

As they got closer they could see that the bright white spot was the sole of a small pink sneaker. It rested alone on the shallow gravel beach next to the swiftly running water.

“You don’t think she went into the creek, do you? Look the shoe is dry; maybe she just took it off to dip in her toes or something. The water’s really cold, after all, and she probably wouldn’t have waded in after she felt it,” Kara babbled. “Besides, if she went into the water she would have taken off both of her shoes, right?”

Kirsty shrugged. “I don’t know. I hope you’re right.”

“I think we’d better leave the shoe where it is,” Denali said. “Heather said she was calling the state troopers, and they will probably want to see where we found it. Let’s go back.”

By the time they returned to the campground, the troopers had arrived. There was no sign of Heather, but two uniformed officers were talking near the picnic table at her campsite. When the girls explained what they had found, one of the officers asked Kirsty to take him to the shoe. The other officer questioned Denali and Kara.

“Did you observe anything unusual last night or this morning?” she asked.

Denali thought for a moment. “I heard a car drive off last night. It was 2:42 according to my phone. I don’t think it could have anything to do with this, though, since Emma wasn’t missing until this morning.”

The trooper was making rapid notes. “We don’t know when she went missing,” she said. “Her mother says she slept through the night and didn’t know the girl was gone until this morning.”

“But the shoe,” Denali said.

“Yes, the shoe. But we don’t know if it is her shoe. It could have been there for weeks,” the trooper said. “We’ll see. Thank you for your help, girls.” They were obviously dismissed.

Denali and Kara returned to their campsite and began slowly packing up. “That shoe was dry. It hasn’t been there any longer than a day,” Denali murmured to Kara.

“You’re right,” Kara said. “And it looks exactly like the kind of shoe Emma would wear.” They rolled up the sleeping bags and took down the tent. They were just about to begin packing all their equipment into the jeep when Kirsty and the other trooper returned.

Kirsty joined the other girls while the trooper carried the shoe in a plastic bag to Emma and Heather’s campsite. Heather came out of the tent to speak to the officer. When she saw the shoe, her face crumbled.

“That’s Emma’s shoe! Where did you find it?”

As the trooper explained, Heather began to get agitated. “By the creek? You think she fell into the creek?” Heather shook her head violently. “No, not my little girl. Not Emma.”

“We’re organizing a search and rescue operation and they’ll be here shortly. We’ll find Emma, Mrs. Breland, don’t worry.”

“I can’t just wait here,” Heather fretted. “I have to go look. I have to find Emma and take her home.” She looked toward Denali, Kirsty, and Kara as they stood watching her. “Girls, can you pack up everything into my car? I’m going to see where they found this shoe. I need to find Emma and drive her home where she’s safe.”

“Uh, okay,” Kara said.

“Mrs. Breland, it would really be better if you stay here and wait for the rescue squad,” the trooper said.

Ignoring him, Heather turned and began striding toward the trail to the creek. One of the troopers trotted after her.

Kirsty, Kara, and Denali began packing up Heather’s campsite. There wasn’t too much there. They packed up the cooking gear and camp stove and put them with the cooler of food in the backseat of the car. They shook out the sleeping bags. A crumpled sock fell onto the floor of the tent.

Kara held up the sock. Tears formed in her eyes. “Look, white with pink hearts. I sure hope nothing bad has happened to that sweet little girl.”

They finished rolling the sleeping bags and put them into the car along with a small duffel of clothes. They were taking down the tent when two SUVs pulled up. A small group of people jumped out, including one with a German shepherd on a short leash. They went to talk to the nearby trooper who nodded in the direction of the three girls.

After a moment, the searchers approached the campsite. “The mother isn’t here?” the man with the dog asked.

“No, she went down that trail to the creek,” Denali said, pointing.

“Do you have an article of clothing from the missing girl?” the man asked.

“Here, I found this sock,” Kara offered. “Will that work?”

“Should be okay,” the man said, taking the sock. Without another word, he and the dog turned and began walking down the trail toward the creek. The others followed.

Denali, Kirsty and Kara finished packing the tent and put it into the car. Then they went back to their own campsite.

“Do you think we should be searching?” Kirsty asked.

“I guess the search and rescue teams know what they are doing,” Denali said. “We don’t want to get in the way. But when they come back we could ask if they need our help.”

They pattered around the camp without speaking for a few minutes, folding jackets, stirring ashes, neatly stacking leftover firewood.

“Huh,” Denali said. “I just thought of something.”

“What?” Kara asked.

“There was no Barbie backpack.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Emma said she had a Barbie backpack in the tent. But maybe she took it with her when she went exploring,” Kara suggested.

“I guess she would have,” Denali said.

“For that matter, where are her pink boots?” Kirsty said.

“You’re right, if she were wearing sneakers, her boots should be here,” Denali said. “She couldn’t fit a pair of rubber boots into a Barbie backpack.”

The girls looked at each other for a minute. “You know, there was something kind of weird about that shoe,” Denali said. “Remember, Kirsty, what first caught your eye?”

“Yeah, it was the bright white sole. They must be a brand new pair of shoes. Oh, wait, I think I see what you mean.”

“I think we’d better tell the troopers,” Denali said.

“Tell the troopers what?” Kara asked.

“The sole of the shoe was still clean. You know how muddy everything has been. How did Emma get all the way to the creek without getting her shoe dirty?”

The trooper seemed skeptical about the clean shoe, but she was a lot more interested when the girls explained about the missing backpack and boots. “Okay, we’ll handle it from here,” the trooper said.

The girls slowly loaded all their camping gear into the jeep, delaying as long as they could. Denali shook her head. “There is something fishy going on here. Heather headed straight down that trail. How did she know where you found the shoe?” she asked Kirsty.

“I suppose if they told her that it was by the creek, she might have known which trail led that way,” Kirsty said.

“Yeah, I suppose so,” Denali said. “I hope they find Emma soon.”

They had loaded everything into the jeep. There was no longer any excuse to stay, but none of them made any move to go. Instead, they waited.

Finally, the trooper that they had talked to earlier approached them. She was smiling. “Good news. Emma is fine.”

“Thank God. Where did you find her?” Kara asked.

“Once you told us about the missing items and the clean shoes, we had another talk with Mrs. Breland. Eventually, she confessed that Emma was with a friend of hers. She staged the whole disappearance so that she wouldn’t have to send Emma back to her father.”

“That’s such a relief,” Kirsty said. “Thank you for telling us.”

“You’re welcome,” the trooper said. “When the officer found Emma, he said she was eating fruit loops and talking about making s’mores with some big girls last night.”

“So what happens to Emma now? Denali asked.

“Her dad is flying up to get her. She’ll be fine.”

“I wonder how Heather planned to hide Emma in the long term,” Denali said. “And what she planned to tell Emma about why she couldn’t talk to her dad.”

“I don’t have those answers,” the trooper said. “She may not have thought that far ahead. I gather that it was a sort of last-minute act of desperation. She called her friend in the middle of the night and told her that there was an emergency. Mrs. Breland asked her to pick up Emma right away and take care of her. The friend didn’t know anything about the false missing person report until we showed up at her house. Anyway, Mrs. Breland is in some trouble, but the girl is fine.”

“I feel a little sorry for Heather, but I’m so glad that Emma is okay,” Kara said. “It would have been terrible for her dad if she just disappeared.”

“We appreciate your tip,” the trooper said. “I think we would have figured it out eventually, but Mrs. Breland may have had a chance to take the girl and run if you hadn’t clued us in so quickly.”

“I’m glad we could help,” Denali said. “The important thing is that Emma’s okay.”

“Oh, one more thing,” said the trooper, “You’ll be glad to know that Emma has pink rubber boots, a Barbie raincoat, and a Barbie backpack in her possession this morning. She insisted on showing them all to the officer.”

Denali laughed. “Way to go, Emma.”