



FINDERS KEEPERS

By

Debbie Kuhn

I can still remember every detail about that February weekend in Blackwater Swamp. Nobody believed the story we told when we finally made it out of there.

We went in looking for specimens to use for our sixth grade science project. I was the nerdy one: rimless glasses, hand me down clothes, and even a square name – Neil. Our funny guy was Brady – a boy with strawberry-blond hair and too many freckles to count.

Willard was a chubby kid who made an effort to get along with everybody – even when they made fun of him. We made fun of him, too, by using the nickname he'd earned in the first grade when he'd unknowingly eaten a plate of canned dog food – and liked it. Yeah, we couldn't resist calling him Puppy Chow – P.C. for short.

The truth is, we were all outcasts, but at least my gang, The River Rats, wasn't a bunch of ignorant bullies like the Swamp Bandits. Gator, their leader, had flunked the sixth grade twice. The hulky, silent Swarovski twins did whatever he told them to, while Gator's skinny runt cousin, Clayton, just tagged along.

That cloudy Saturday afternoon was perfect for exploring. All of us wore jeans, sneakers and long-sleeved shirts, and a backpack carrying a flask of water, a compass, chocolate bars, insect repellent, and a few plastic storage containers.

Our gang had reached the Northern Blackwater Trail when we noticed the Swamp Bandits sneaking up behind us. We'd already managed to collect two miles' worth of moss samples, wildflowers, insect larvae, snake skins, and snail shells. If it hadn't been for Gator, we'd have headed home.

The three of us sprinted over to another trail that branched off from the northern path. We figured if we lost the bullies for a while, they'd give up and leave.

The even spookier South Trail was bordered by denser vegetation, and ancient cypress trees dripping with Spanish moss. The eerie language of unseen creatures filled our ears, while the pungent smell of decay hanging in the warm air almost left a bad taste in our mouths.

But we weren't afraid – of the swamp, anyway.

“You think they've turned back yet?” Puppy Chow was trying to unwrap a chocolate bar.

“I'm hoping they got lost - or eaten,” Brady said. He'd had his fair share of humiliating run-ins with the Bandits (we'd all been mooned), but Puppy Chow had suffered the worst.

The Swarovski twins had held P.C. down on the playground last year so Gator could force-feed him a dead worm.

“Let's go another mile before we head home,” I suggested. Better safe than sorry.

We'd almost reached our turnaround point when I had to stop and clean my glasses. I used my sleeve to wipe off the gnat goo, and when I shoved them back on, that's when I noticed the funny rock lying next to an abandoned alligator nest.

It appeared to be the size of an ostrich egg, but was shaped more like a football. Its mottled, greenish-gray surface was rough and bumpy.

“Guys, check it out.” I squatted by the trail and picked the stone up with both hands. It wasn't as heavy as I thought it'd be.

P.C. leaned over for a closer look and almost lost his balance.

“Man, oh, man,” Brady said. “This rock would *make* my collection, Neil.”

“Hey, finders keepers.” I grinned up at him, only half-joking.

“Maybe there's more.” Puppy Chow glanced around.

The three of us searched the area, but came up with nothing. We decided to head back to the Northern Trail.

I'd only taken a few steps when I felt the stone move in the crook of my arm. Startled, I gently placed it on the ground and stepped back.

“Brady, P.C., hold on a minute. I don't think this is a rock after all.”

They joined me and we stood around it, watching and waiting in expectant silence.

A pointed beak poked through the thick shell, and a featherless, gray-skinned bird wiggled its way out. The creature had a bone protruding from the back of its head, and bulging red eyes. It wobbled back and forth and let out a screech.

“Man, oh, man.”

I grinned. “We're gonna be rich.”

“That thing's uglier than Gator's hairy ass.”

“I *heard* that, dog breath.”

P.C. looked like he'd swallowed his tongue. We turned and faced the Swamp Bandits.

Gator crossed his arms. “Whatcha got there?”

“Finders keepers,” Brady said.

Clayton giggled. “Losers weepers. Your gang loses.”

Puppy Chow snatched up the screeching baby bird and took off running, heading deeper into the swamp. Brady and I followed, racing across a finger of land past inky-black water filled with cypress “knees.” We ended up on an island – and off the trail.

Puppy Chow stood in a clearing, his bloody fingers dripping. The little bird wobbled silently at his feet.

A strange stillness had fallen over the swamp. The Bandits caught up to us, but our gangs stood apart from each other, listening.

We all looked up. Soaring thirty feet above our heads were two enormous birds that looked like pterodactyls.

The creatures dove at the same time. Everybody scattered.

I heard Brady's terrified cries and turned my head. One of the monsters had clamped its talons onto his shoulders and was lifting him into the air.

Puppy Chow launched himself at Brady, grabbing his legs. The creature continued flying low to the ground.

The other bird lunged at me and I threw myself clear, tumbling into the path of the creature carrying Brady and P.C. I whipped out the insect repellent and aimed it at the beast's red eyes.

Its screech nearly burst my eardrums, but it dropped my friends and soared out of sight.

The beast's mate had gone after Gator, who had stolen the baby. We watched the giant bird swoop down and snatch up the doomed leader of the Swamp Bandits.

He was never seen again.

Until.....

THE END