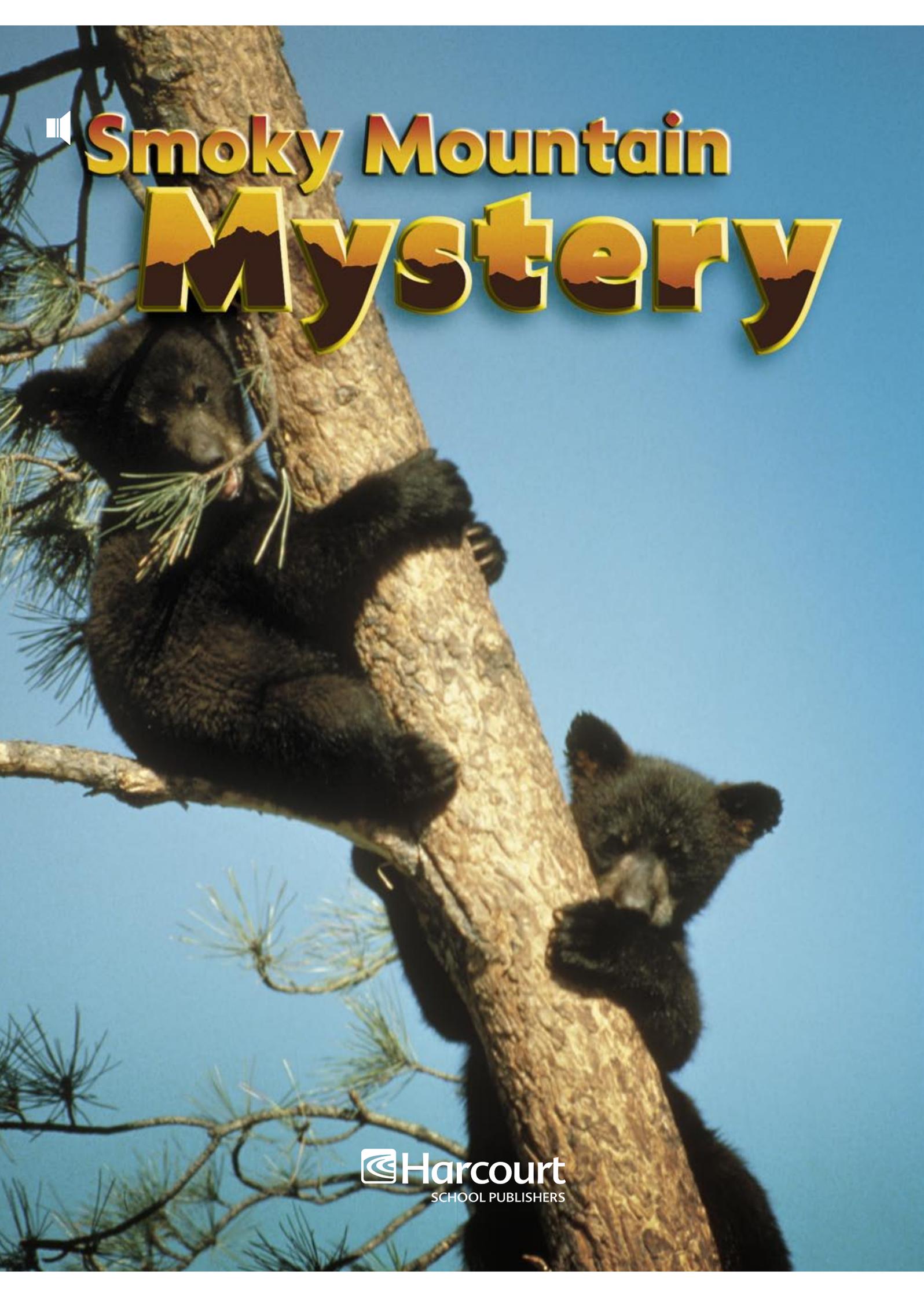




Smoky Mountain Mystery



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by Sharon Kahkonen

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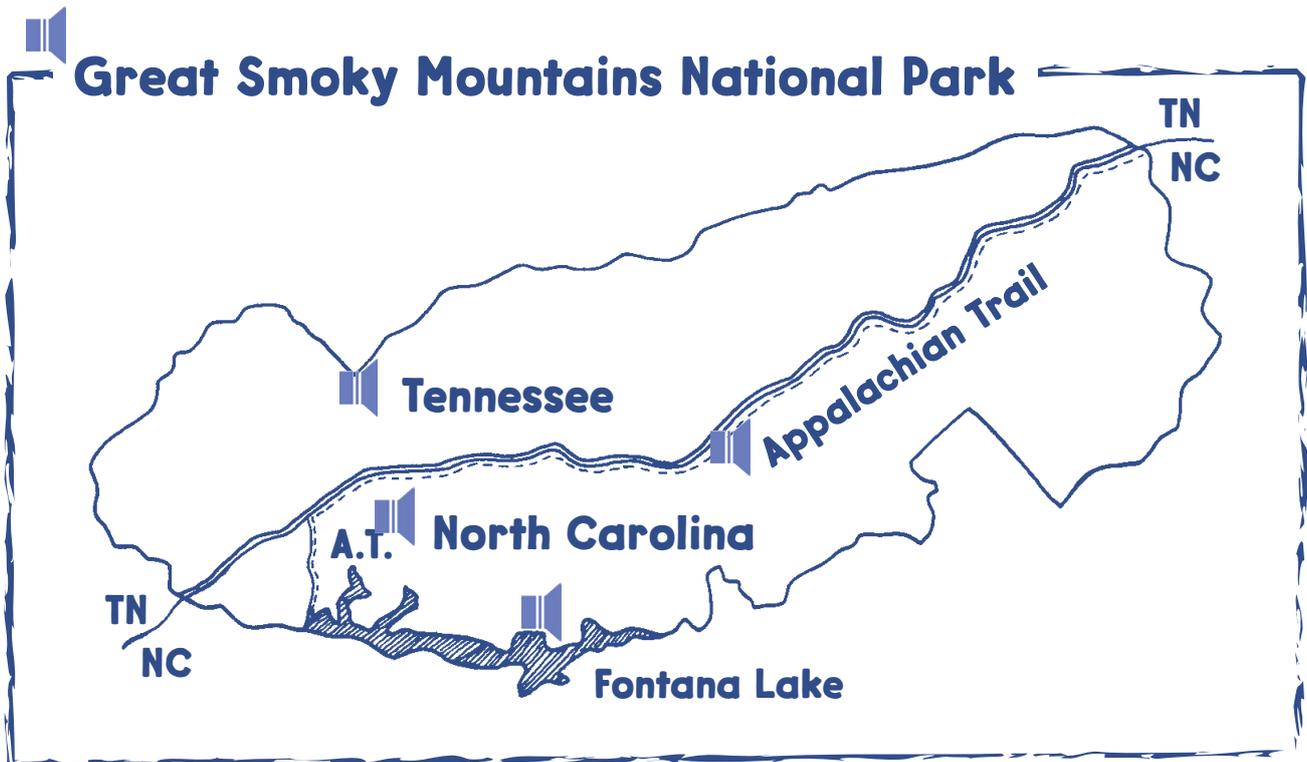
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■ Camping in the Mountains

Last July 4, my family and I set out on a backpacking trip in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Little did I know that on that fateful day, I would begin my career as Sandra Brown, Nature Detective. This is a true story about how I solved the Smoky Mountain Mystery.

■ First, let me tell you a little about the mountains where all of this took place. The Smokies are among the oldest mountains in the world, formed some 200 to 300 million years ago. The park is home to more than 10,000 identified species. These mountains are called the Smokies because of the mist that hangs in the air like smoke. The air is very humid, and it rains a great deal. It sounds like the perfect setting for a mystery, don't you think?

■ We started our hike from a campground called Low Gap. With full packs, we hiked up to the Appalachian Trail, called



the AT for short. This trail runs from Georgia all the way to Maine. In the Smokies, the AT runs along the top ridge of the mountains. This area is called backcountry because it is far away from any roads or buildings. As we hiked, some white-tailed deer bounded across the trail in front of us. They were very well camouflaged. This means that their colors and markings made it hard for us to see them until they ran right in front of us.

Because it is so damp in the Smokies, the environment is perfect for salamanders. We found several different kinds just by digging through the leaf litter.

We had a long, hard trek to the top of the ridge, especially with all our gear on our backs, but the view from the top was spectacular! Our campsite was in a thick grove of trees next to a stream. We pitched our tents and cooked supper.

