

Something Fishy in the Forest

Are Annie and her best friend being followed
down a dangerous trail?



“A-choo!” Twelve-year-old Cindy suddenly sneezed, and her foot slipped off the narrow hiking trail. For one terrifying second, Cindy dangled over the edge of the cliff and the 50-foot drop to the rocky riverbed below. Then Annie’s hand shot out, grabbed Cindy’s backpack, and pulled her best friend back to safety.

Leaning against a huge boulder, the two girls caught their breath. Their hearts were racing.

“Whoa,” Annie finally said. “That was close. Are you okay?”

Cindy was still shaking from the fright, but she nodded. “I guess that sneeze made me slip. I only sneeze around people’s pets. And when I get nervous. Like now!”

Annie couldn’t blame Cindy for being freaked out. For the past five hours, the two girls had been hiking in the woods of Mount Pawtown. When they

had started out that morning with their backpacks full of snacks and water, the spring sun had been shining brightly. They had climbed to the lake at the top of the mountain, telling each other jokes and checking out the wildlife. It had been fun.

Then everything changed.

As they were heading back down the mountain, storm clouds had begun gathering overhead. Even worse, they had started hearing strange noises in the woods. The noises seemed to be coming from right behind them and sounded like: *Thwattchhhhhh. Thwattchhhh.*

“What in the kibble is going on?” Annie wondered again for the fiftieth time.

“Is someone—or something—following us?” Cindy asked now, pushing away from the boulder and looking back along the trail.

“I don’t know,” Annie said. Normally, she would have had an answer. After all, she was Pawtown’s one and only animal detective and an expert at solving outdoor cases. But she had never heard such a strange sound like this in the wilderness before.

Annie smiled, trying to make Cindy feel better. “Whatever was making that noise is probably way behind us by now—”

Thwattchhhhhh.

Annie was interrupted by the noise. It came from the shadowy trees about 20 feet behind them.

Determined to solve the mystery, Annie walked back to investigate. But she couldn’t spot anything in the prickly bushes that lined the trail or between the thick trunks of the trees. Whatever was making the creepy noise was hidden in the forest.

“What *is* it?” Cindy whispered to Annie when she returned.

Annie could only guess. “Maybe some kind of animal like . . .” She trailed off.

“Like what?” Cindy insisted.

Annie had been about to say, “. . . like a bear.” But she had stopped herself. She didn’t want to make Cindy any more scared than she was.

“Nothing, don’t worry,” Annie said. She looked at her watch and glanced up at the cloudy sky. “We better keep going. It’s still two miles to the trailhead. We don’t want to get stuck out here in the dark.”

“You got that right,” Cindy agreed. She looked around with wide eyes and then sneezed again.

The girls headed down the mountain. In about a half mile, the trail led them to a stream. Without stopping, Cindy started to wade through the icy water to get to the other side.

“No, wait,” Annie said. “Remember, the water in the middle is too deep. We have to cross like we did before.” She pointed to a log that had been placed across the stream as a kind of bridge.

“Oh, right,” Cindy said. “I guess I’m so ready to get off the mountain, I forgot.” Stepping up on the log, she put her hands out like a tightrope walker and quickly crossed the stream. “Come on, Annie, hurry!” she called from the other side.

Just as Annie was crossing the log, she heard the sound behind her.

Thwatchhhh.

Annie turned her head fast to try to catch a glimpse of their pursuer. She couldn’t see anything—and her quick movements made her nearly lose her balance. For a scary moment, she almost plunged into the stream.

“Annie!” Cindy cried. “Watch where you’re going!”

Annie got her footing back and continued across to where Cindy was waiting for her. Immediately, Annie crouched down and started pulling on the log. It was too heavy for her to move by herself.

“Help me, Cindy,” Annie said. Cindy grabbed onto the log, and together they were able to pull it through the water to their side of the stream.

“There,” Annie said, satisfied. “We’ve gotten rid of the log bridge.”

“Good job!” Cindy said happily. “The only way anything could follow us now would be to climb up that tree on the other side and leap across the stream. No one could do that!”

The girls gave each other high fives and headed down the trail again.

Thirty minutes later, after walking another mile, they took a break. Sitting with their backs up against a wooden post, they munched on their last two apples.

At the top of the post was a sign with an arrow pointing down the mountain and the words:

CAMP COMFORT 1 MILE

Annie thought of Camp Comfort. It was a big, friendly place with cabins and a mess hall. The owners of the camp had three dogs who loved to fetch and a big, friendly cat named Snowball who curled up next to the laundry line. Snowball sometimes hid in campers’ sleeping bags. Annie couldn’t wait to get to the camp, have a cold soda, and curl up in her own sleeping bag.

As they finished their apples, the wind changed direction, and Cindy’s nose wrinkled. “Yuck!” she said. “What’s that smell?”

Annie’s nose picked it up, too, and she grinned. “I can solve that mystery at least.” Annie reached over and plucked something slimy and scaly off the back of Cindy’s hiking boot. “You must have stepped on a fish tail up at the lake.” Annie tossed it into the woods.

“Yuck!” Cindy squealed, and for some reason her reaction made them both laugh. It really wasn’t that funny, but it felt good to forget about possibly being followed. Just then—

Thwattchhhh.

The sound in the woods had returned.

Whatever was making the noise had managed to get across the stream even without the log bridge. And it was still following them! Cindy's eyes went wide, and she looked ready to jump up and run.

"Wait!" said Annie, holding out a hand to stop her. "Don't panic! I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?" Cindy asked in a frightened voice, then sneezed.

"This has gone far enough," Annie said. "I'm going solve this case and find out what's following us."

Leaving Cindy sitting against the post, Annie crept quietly back along the trail and into the woods. She didn't see any tracks. Just a wide mark on the ground as if something had been dragged in the dirt. Then Annie spotted a foot-long piece of white cord dangling from a low bush.

Suddenly, Annie let out a howl of excitement as all the clues clicked into place. And just in time.

From the other side of the trees, she could hear Cindy shout, "Something's coming!"

Annie didn't panic. Instead, the animal detective smiled.

Thanks to all the clues, she knew exactly what was happening.

**Stop
Here!**

Discussion Questions

1. What two things can make Cindy sneeze?
2. Why did Annie and Cindy pull the log to one side of the stream? How did the girls think this would help their situation?
3. When Annie heard Cindy shout, why do you think Annie smiled?
Can you name which clues she is thinking about?
4. What (or who) do you think is following the girls?

OKAY!

Now keep reading to see if your predictions were right!