

CHAPTER FOUR, SEBASTIAN

The boy in front of him was almost completely covered in mud. He was older than him and quite a bit taller and leaner too. He simply stood there, slouching, and continued staring at Tristan.

Finally he looked down to the floor and asked “Who are you?” in a monotonous tone. “What’s your name? What are you doing here? How old are you? Is that your bag and stick outside the entrance?” He took a breath and added, “And why haven’t you got your torch on?” Tristan didn’t answer for a moment. The boy had asked him so many questions at once, he didn’t know where to begin. And why did he talk in that droning voice?

“I’m... my name is Tristan. I found this cave and was exploring it. Then I got startled by the bats and I dropped my torch. I think it’s run out of batteries now.”

The boy’s face lit up. “Bats? You’ve seen the bats? They are Lesser Horseshoe Bats and they’ve just had their babies. They have their young in July, if you look closely you can see the babies hold on to their mothers.” He became all excited and his voice was now animated, not dull like before. He talked pretty fast too. “Did you know that they leave the roost when they are just 6 weeks old? That’s pretty amazing, isn’t it. You must have disturbed them because they normally don’t go outside till the sun goes down. They are great to watch, I often sit here and watch them fly out of the cave and then I follow them and see them flying overhead, catching insects. They love flies and midgets, though they’ll eat beetles and spiders too.”

He shone his torch up above Tristan. Tristan followed the beam of light and saw a black gap in the wall, high above where he had been crouching. “Look there!” the tall boy said.

“Lesser Horseshoe Bats live in colonies of up to 70 individuals. They’ll roost anywhere in this

cave, but sometimes they'll roost somewhere up there. It's too high for me to reach, but there is a little tunnel or something up there, and I have often seen them come out of that."

Tristan was a little overwhelmed. The boy was talking so fast that he could hardly keep up. "What's your name?" he asked, trying to slow him down.

The boy looked at the water on the floor. "Sebastian." he said, and his voice had become dull again. "My name is Sebastian and I am 11 years old and I live in Roberts Street and I go to St Anne's College."

He then shone his torch on the wall and touched it with his other hand. He scraped something off the wall and started sniffing it. Then he held his hand out to Tristan.

"This is guano," he said, his voice rising in excitement again. "Bat poo. It normally looks a bit like mouse droppings, but after a while it crumbles and looks like this. It smells good, a bit like earth really."

Tristan kept his hand firmly to himself. "You're pulling my leg," he said. "That's just soil or something. That's not poo."

"I haven't touched your leg!" exclaimed Sebastian, fiercely. He dropped his hand by his side. Tristan was confused, and an awkward silence fell between them.

Tristan liked this boy, but he also found him really weird. Then Sebastian said, in his monotone voice, "I was hoping you would be my friend. I haven't got any friends. And I was going to share my cave with you. But now you don't like me any more."

He wanted to be his friend? A hope rose inside Tristan. With a friend, he would be able to come back to this cave, and it would be safer because there would be two of them. Sebastian seemed to know a lot, and he would like to see a baby bat clinging to its mother. Sebastian also had a torch,

a torch that was working. With his help, Tristan would be able to get out of the cave, much more easily than having to go ever so slowly in the pitch dark.

“I do like you,” he said. “You’re just a bit ... strange. But,” he added quickly, hoping he had not hurt the boy again, “I would like to be your friend. And I’d like to see the bats properly.” Sebastian’s face lit up, and a big grin beamed on his face. “I have a frie..end, I have a frie..end,” he chanted. “Do you want to see the bats now?” and he shone his torch around, trying to find some. “No, I can’t,” said Tristan. “I am all wet through and I am freezing cold. I must go home now. But my torch isn’t working any more. Can we go out together, so I can see with the light of your torch?”

“Sure,” and Sebastian turned around, still chanting “I have a frie..end, I have a frie..end.”

To Tristan, the way back felt much shorter than the way in. On the way in he hadn’t known what to expect, what he was going to see and meet. He hadn’t known if there would be any side passages, or if there were any sudden drops in the floor. He had felt unsure and a little afraid. Now, he felt on top of the world. He felt as if this cave belonged to him and Sebastian and that it would be the start of many new adventures. These summer holidays were going to be fun!

They walked slowly back through the tunnel till they couldn’t stand up anymore. Then they went down on their hands and knees till they had to go all the way on their tummies to squeeze their way through the entrance.

Tristan blinked in the sudden sunlight. Gosh, it seemed so bright! Opening and closing his eyes a few times, he looked over at Sebastian, who was busy taking his top off. Underneath he wore a dull red T-shirt, and unlike the very muddy sweater, it was clean. He took his wellies off as well and then the muddy joggings that he had been wearing on top of his black shorts. He wrapped them all up in a bundle, went down on his knees and started rummaging in the

undergrowth. Intrigued, Tristan looked on. Sebastian scooped up loose leaves and twigs and lots of big chunks of moss, and put them aside. In the big hole underneath it all there was a black bin bag. Opening it, he took out a pair of trainers and put them aside. He then put his bundle of clothing in it, put the black bag back in the hole and scattered all the moss and twigs and leaves back on it.

Tristan looked on, amazed. He hadn't even noticed that there was anything hidden there when he came here before. He asked, "Why do you do that?"

Sebastian looked at him as if he was stupid, but said "That way my mum doesn't know that I come here. I keep these old clothes here and then put them on when I go into the cave." That was smart, Tristan had to admit, though looking at Sebastian's muddy hands and smudges on his face, he wasn't so sure it would work. Sebastian added "I use wellies so my feet don't get so wet and cold. Like yours are now," and he pointed at Tristan's soggy wet trainers.

Then he jumped up and announced dully, "Now we have to go play in the woods."
"Why?" asked Tristan, "I have to go home, remember?"
"We have to go play in the woods because I told my mum I was going to play in the woods. So I have to play in the woods now."

Tristan was baffled. "But your mum won't know. You only told her that so you could go into the cave. Right?"

"I can't lie. If I tell my mum I am going to play in the woods then I am going to play in the woods. I always play in the woods when I come here."

Tristan was confused again. "But you don't tell your mum that you go into the cave, do you?"

"No, but that is not a lie. I simply do not tell her what else I do. So it is not a lie."

Tristan didn't know what to say to that. But he loved playing tag, so he simply said "Catch me if you can," and ran off. At school he was one of the fastest runners, but he was only 9 years old. His new friend was two years older and tall besides, so he had much longer legs. Sebastian grinned and ran after Tristan.

Running around soon made Tristan feel warm again. Sebastian never managed to catch up, though he kept coming real close. A few times he stumbled over a tree root and fell, or tripped over his own legs. At one time he even ran straight into a tree, but he didn't seem to feel any of it and simply got up again and ran on. Finally he managed to catch Tristan and they both tumbled to the ground, panting and laughing at the same time.

"That was fun," said Sebastian. "It is nice to have a friend."
"Yes," answered Tristan. "That was fun. But I really do need to go home now. Shall we come here again tomorrow?" and he got up.
"Yes, ofcourse!" replied Sebastian, getting up too. "In the morning. What about 10 o'clock?"
"OK, I'll try to be here at 10 too. See you tomorrow," and he started walking towards home, looking back to wave at Sebastian. Sebastian's clean clothes had gotten quite dirty from all the running around and falling. Maybe his mum wouldn't notice the mud from the cave after all.