

FIRST FOR ME

I'm going to write it all down, the story of Sneaky Pants, so you will know what I know. This year's weekend youth camping trip to Shaking Tree Mountain included middle schoolers for the



first time, and my mom and dad encouraged me to join them.

They hoped I'd stop screaming about saving the treehouse and the climbing tree in our backyard. Distracting me with this trip would keep me out of the way. But I should have a say. I used to play in that treehouse with my little brother before the *great fall*, but that's not a good reason to chop down the tree.

I lost the argument and made the best of their assignment. Besides, Mom said there are plenty of trees to climb in the forest—a way to see

beyond life's sadness. So, I packed my cinnamon taffy, ready to camp with Jack Cleverton, my best friend, and the new boy Sebastian Wisconsin, to explore trails while pretending my parents hadn't hired a man with a chainsaw.

Who knew my mom and dad were onto something huge, something they weren't aware of—that would change my life forever? After the camping trip, our church group made the newspaper's front page, and my name appeared in the article six times. I'm the most popular girl in middle school now, and I've discovered newspapers write great articles and not just obituaries.

But let me begin with Friday night and setting up our tents, so you'll understand how a one-eyed stuffed elephant put Lick Skillet on the map.

THE FALL WEEKEND TRIP

The beginning included Jack, a track star who does everything fast, even zipping around with tent poles. Right after we unloaded the cars, he staked his tent next to the pine tree and reached for another rod, jumping like a rabbit. “Ants. We have ants.”

I bellowed, “We’re in the woods.”

“They’ll get into my protein bars. Does anyone have ant spray?”

Sebastian scratched his head, fiddling with his tent poles. “I don’t want to be here. Bugs. Ants. Dirt. My books already have dust on the pages.”

Jack hopped over to Sebastian. “Who brings a backpack full of books on a camping trip?”

I jumped between them. “Jack, stop pestering Sebastian. He likes to read. You like to run. And I’m supposed to like the great outdoors.”

Sebastian snickered, pushing his curls behind his ears. “Jack learned from the best. You, more than anyone, quiz me about my books. As for camping, Hobbit Girl, you’ve never slept in the forest or hiked, have you?”

My shoulders wiggled, and my exhale sent a squeaky roar as if a lion lived inside me. “No, but this is great. I hear frogs croaking as if they’re welcoming us, and those orange and brown leaves are pretty. There’s a squirrel on the branch right by the trail, too.” I pointed, dancing, my heart happy to be outside.

Jack applauded his work. “I’m finished. My tent’s up.”

I scurried around the trees, taking in the smells. My nose tickled as if something lingered behind the bushes, as if a creature called to me. “Who’s out there? What do you want?”

Jack tapped my shoulder. “Who are you talking to?”

“I’m talking to nature.”

“That’s the wind whistling and the water in the river splashing over the rocks. No one is calling to you.”

“Whatever.” I leaned on a tree and watched Sebastian fight with his tent poles while Jack scooted his tent away from the ant pile.

Sebastian asked, “Where are the instructions for this thing?”

Swiping my hair from my face, I wiped the sweat from my forehead and marched up to Jack. “Will you help Sebastian before he explodes?”

Sebastian twisted like a rubber band. “I don’t explode.”

“You do. I’ve heard you. You may do it in a low voice, but a slow vapor escapes between your lips like a steam engine.”

Sebastian placed a hand on his neck. “Hobbit Girl, a little space. I need more room.”

“You have all the room in the world.”

“No, you’re in my face and ask too many questions, then I can’t breathe. Space, I need space.” He paced, spinning in tight steps. “Hobbit Girl, will you hit pause for the weekend, please?”

I wrinkled my nose. “I’ll try, and we’ll have fun, you’ll see.”

Jack took his turn, trying to calm the whirlwind stirring between us. “You two argue like brother and sister.”

In unison, we said, “We’re not related.” And Sebastian continued, “I’m an only child.”

I puckered, wishing my baby brother Brett was still alive. There’s not a day I don’t miss him. I took purposeful steps to double-check the items in my backpack, confident I’d packed Brett’s stuffed animal, the gray elephant. I ran my fingers over the now discolored, one-eyed toy. Sleeping with it every night helps me fall asleep—since the terrible day in our backyard.

Behind me, I heard Jack and Sebastian debating how to put up a tent. Sebastian said, “I’m not trying to get in your way. I’m helping you.”

Jack slowed and took a breath. “I’m sorry. I take over. I make everything a race.”

I dropped my backpack by a tree next to my cooler and unfolded my hammock from my tote bag. “Let’s see, those two trees near the trail will work great.” I placed my hammock on the ground, ready to get to work. “Hey, you two, I brought a hoodie in case it gets cold tonight.”

Sebastian wiped his brow, placing his bags closer to his tent, and he picked up a book with his free hand. “Cold? I don’t think we’ll need coats. If I were home, October nights would be perfect for reading on the porch.”

“There’s no porch here, but when the sun goes down. I’m wearing a jacket.” I cackled, knowing I love to wear a hoodie for the pockets to hide taffy inside since snacking is my favorite activity.

Sebastian found the instructions. “I don’t know why they make this so hard. Too many parts. Too many ends don’t match.”

I wiggled over. “Jack finished setting up your tent, and you’re still on step one on that paper. Your boy cave awaits.”

“Oh, thank you, Jack.”

Thinking about how Sebastian moved to Lick Skillet, Texas, a few months ago, I disappeared into my world. As a new orphan, not that he uses the word *orphan*, but Sebastian now lived with his aunt and uncle right around the corner from me.

I inhaled deeply, knowing I quiz Sebastian more than I should, but I must have everyone’s story.

Sebastian glanced at the sky as if he had whispered words to someone.

Blasting through the silence, I asked, “Sebastian, why did you bring three tote bags? We’re staying tonight, Saturday and going home late Sunday afternoon. What did you pack?”

“I’ve planned for anything. I have my iPad, earbuds, laptop, and camera—one bag for those items. The second bag has my clothes. The third bag has more books, in case I get bored.”

“Bored? We’re in the great outdoors.” I ran my fingers through my bangs. “This is our chance for an adventure, or so I’ve been told.”

**

Pastor Harrison, my uncle, Mary Moreland, who retired from the bank and volunteers because she's bored, and Pete Duster, the twin's father, planned to chaperone thirty kids. Mary drove the church van with most of the girls riding with her. The rest of us piled into Pete's truck and Harrison's old clunker.

Only three sixth graders turned in permission slips to attend the camping trip, which included Jack, Sebastian, and me. Jack is twelve. Sebastian, too. And I'm eleven. The rest of the youth group consisted mainly of high schoolers, with a few seventh and eighth graders.

Harrison finished unloading tents, totes, and sleeping bags from the back of his pickup, and all the teens began setting up their spots by a tree, a bush, or in the shade. The coolers and backpacks were stacked in Pete's truck, and everyone rummaged for their items, unpacking and moving camping gear to its designated place.

Pete announced, "Everyone, finish setting up camp. We have four sites, B-12 through B-15. Beyond those trees," he pointed, "are the restrooms. The campground is full, so let's be on our best behavior. Let's keep our campsites clean. And keep the noise down."

Sebastian responded, "Yes, sir. We'll do our part."

I turned to Jack. "The others don't have one thing in place. And you've already assembled two tents without breathing."

"I'm organized. Nothing wrong with having things in place and ready to use." Jack grinned, and Sebastian patted him on the shoulder. "Thanks again for putting up mine."

Kicking the ground, the loose dirt swirled over my tennis shoes. I dug into my bag, ensuring my cinnamon taffy made it up the mountain. I slipped a few pieces into my jeans pocket. Grabbing a bottled water from the pouch, I downed the drink. "It's sticky out here. But I love it."

Jack hollered to Sebastian. "Here, catch. I've got an extra sleeping bag."

"Thanks. I didn't think to bring one."

Jack turned to me. "You won't need a hoodie. I'm drowning in sweat." He wiped his neck with his shirt.

I jumped up and down on a pile of leaves, not responding to his hoodie comment. “Don’t you love that sound? It reminds me of popcorn popping in the microwave, like ten popcorn bags.”

“What are you doing?” Jack bent his head, pointing at my shoes.

“I’m making flat popcorn.” I hopped like a rabbit, giggling at the noise.

Sebastian piped in, “I could use some popcorn right now. And less of your jumping. Remember, we’re to be on our best behavior.”

“This is my best behavior.”

“That’s what worries me. There’s so much earth, tons of pine needles, and even more leaves.” He kicked at a stack of needles, grunting like a bear caught in a world where he didn’t belong.

“We’re outside. Outside includes dirt,” I assured Sebastian. “This is the great outdoors. Trails. The river. We might find a cave. And trees. I can climb trees.”

“I don’t like caves. They’re dark. We could get lost.”

“No, I’ll be your guide.” I hopped to Sebastian, who pulled a shiny object from his pocket while holding a book in the other hand. “Is that a compass?”

“Yes, it’s my grandfather’s compass.”

“We could use your compass to find our way on the trails.” I reached for his book and compass. “You’ll need both hands to get your stuff into your tent.”

“Don’t get dirt on the pages. I’m reading *War and Peace* for the third time. And don’t lose my compass. My grandfather gave it to me before—”

I flipped the casing open, rubbing my fingers along the glass. “—before what?”

“—before he left last summer.” Sebastian inhaled deeply, groaning. “He raised me after my mom and dad died in a car wreck when I was five. Then everything changed last August. But you already know this, so stop with the questions.”

Sebastian tossed a tote bag inside the tent and snatched the compass and *War and Peace* from my hands. He placed the heavy book on top of his backpack. “Never mind. I should go home. I

never wanted to come on this trip.” He tucked the treasured compass into his pocket, stomping away and down a path.

I called, “Be careful. The river’s over there.”

Sebastian trudged down the narrow trail toward the river’s edge, swatting at bugs hovering too close for an inside-the-library-nose-in-the-book kind of boy.

Jack added a warning. “Don’t go too far.”

I yelled, “Remember, we’re in the woods. There are monsters out here.”

Sebastian glanced back at me, frowning, and disappeared behind the trees.