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Opening extract from

Camping Out

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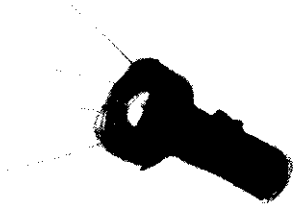
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1

A Summery Sleepover

"Okay, you guys," Taylor Kent said. "It's time to decide where we're going to have our next sleepover party."

Taylor and her three best friends were spending a sunny midsummer afternoon at the Maple Street Swim Club. They had just spent a couple of hours playing tetherball and Marco Polo. Now they were drying off by lying on their beach towels at the edge of the main pool.

Kara Wyatt groaned and reached up to

squeeze more water out of her thick, wavy red hair. "Do we have to decide now? It's too hot to talk!" she said.

"It's been hot all summer," Taylor teased. "And you still manage to do plenty of talking."

Jo Sanchez laughed. "Good one, Taylor."

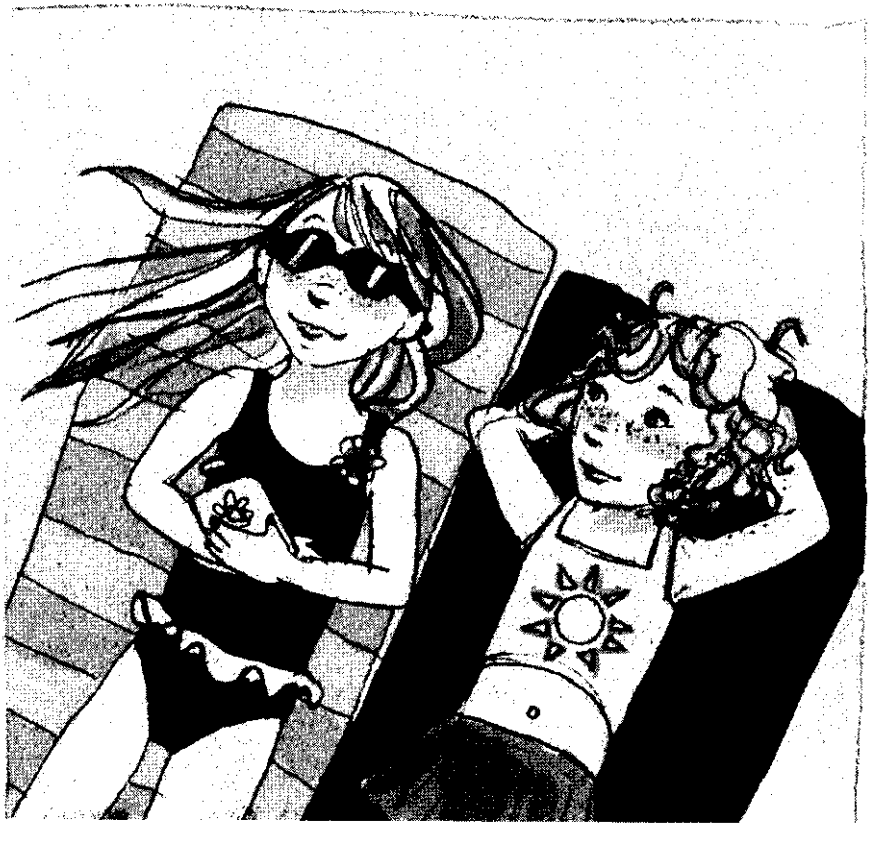
Instead of answering them, Kara flopped over from her back to her stomach



and let out another loud groan. She liked to be dramatic that way.

Emily McDougal sat up and reached for her tube of sunscreen. Emily had very fair skin that burned easily. Her parents insisted that she reapply her sunscreen at least every couple of hours.

She squirted white goo out of the tube and started rubbing it on her arms. "I guess



we should talk about it soon," she said.

But she didn't sound very eager. Sitting out in the sun seemed to be making everyone except Taylor feel a little lazy. Taylor almost never felt lazy. Her mother liked to say that she had been born doing jumping jacks and that she hadn't slowed down since.

"We were supposed to have a sleepover every weekend, remember?" Taylor reminded her friends. "That's why we formed the Sleepover Gang. But it's been over a month since the first party at my house."

Emily stopped rubbing in sunscreen for a second and squinted at Taylor. "That's true," she said. "I didn't realize it had been that long."

"It *has* been a while." Jo sat up. She tilted her head to one side, the way she often did while solving problems at the board in math class, then said, "Thirty-three days, to be exact."

Taylor smiled. Jo always liked to be exact. "So what are we waiting for?" Taylor asked. She scraped her big toe across the scratchy pavement at the pool's edge. Then she dipped it into the cool water. "One of you needs to ask your parents if you can have the next party."

"Yeah." Kara yawned. "I would do it, but my older brothers just got home from baseball camp. And they don't leave for soccer camp for two weeks." She wrinkled her nose. "And, of course, my little brothers are home all summer."

Taylor smiled sympathetically at her friend. Kara was always complaining about having four rambunctious brothers. She made them sound like monsters, and it was true that they could be pests sometimes. Still, Taylor thought it might be kind of fun to have a bunch of other kids around all the time—even boys. It would be like having her own personal basketball

team, right there in the same house.

"Okay, Kara's place is out," she said. "Emmers? What about you? You were talking about maybe having the next sleepover at your house, right?"

Emily nodded and pushed back a strand of her damp, pale blond hair. "I remember," she said, but she sounded distracted. She squirted out another dollop of sunscreen.

Taylor watched her. Emily had already put on sunscreen twice since they'd arrived at the pool. Taylor was glad she didn't have to worry that much about sunscreen—her African-American skin didn't burn as quickly as Emily's very pale skin did. "So did you ask your parents?" she asked Emily.

"Not yet, but I—Oh!" Suddenly, Emily sat up straight, looking excited. The sunscreen tube slipped out of her hand and bounced on the pavement. Jo caught it just before it rolled into the pool.

"What's wrong, Em?" Kara sat up and

stared at her. "Did a mosquito bite you? They've been biting me all day." She scratched at a pink bump on her freckled arm, then at another on her ankle.

Emily smiled. "No, not a mosquito," she said. "But a great idea just bit me!"

It took Taylor a second to figure out what her friend was saying. Sometimes Emily talked like someone from one of the books she was always reading. It could be a little confusing. Taylor always found it easier just to say what you meant straight out.

"You mean you have an idea?" Taylor asked. "Is it about our next slumber party?"

"Yes." Emily's blue eyes sparkled. "I just remembered something. My parents got a new tent last week. I could ask them if we can use it. That way, we could camp out in the backyard for our next sleepover!"

Jo gasped. "That would be so much fun!"

"Definitely!" Kara clapped her hands.

Her freckled cheeks were already pink from being out in the sun all day. But now they went even pinker with excitement. "What an amazing idea! It's the perfect summer sleepover plan!"

"I can ask my dad to cook hot dogs for us on the grill," Emily said. "And being outside in the dark will make our spooky stories even spookier!"

"My mom always talks about going camping," Jo said. "She used to camp out with her sisters and cousins all the time when she was our age. She likes to tell stories about catching fireflies and falling asleep to chirping crickets."

Taylor was glad the others were finally getting excited about the next sleepover. But she wasn't very excited about the camping idea herself. She stared out at the people splashing around in the pool, trying to figure out how to tell her friends that.

"Listen, guys," she said. "Camping could be fun. But it might be too hot to sleep outside."

Emily shrugged. "My house doesn't have air-conditioning," she said. "So we'll be hot either way if the party is at my house."

"Oh." Taylor hadn't thought of that. "Okay. But what if it rains?"

"It's not supposed to rain until next week," Jo said.

Taylor didn't bother to question her. Jo usually knew what she was talking about. "Okay," she said, trying to think of another argument. "But—"

"Hey, Em, do you have a croquet set?" Kara interrupted eagerly. "I've always wanted to learn to play croquet. But our yard isn't big enough. Plus, my brothers would probably just beat one another over the head with the mallets."

Jo giggled. "That sounds like your brothers."

"We have a croquet set," Emily said with a smile. "I'll teach you how to play, Kara."

"Can we fly kites?" Jo asked. "My mom talks about doing that a lot too."

"That sounds like fun," Emily agreed. "When I ask my parents about the campout and the croquet set, I'll ask them if we can get the kites out of the attic."

Taylor opened her mouth to argue against the campout idea. But then she closed it again. She could tell it was no use. Everyone in the Sleepover Gang was excited about their plan of sleeping outside in a tent. Everyone except her.

She bit her lip, not sure what she was going to do. How could she admit the *real* reason she didn't want to camp out?



2

Taylor's Secret

Just then Jo looked at her watch. It was waterproof, so she could wear it even at the pool. "Hey, Taylor," she said. "You told me to tell you when it's almost two fifteen. It's ten minutes after two right now."

"Thanks." Taylor jumped to her feet and picked up her towel. "I've got to go. I have soccer practice today."

Kara looked disappointed. "But we just started planning our campout sleepover!" she complained.

"That's okay. You guys can keep planning without me." Taylor smiled, trying to seem normal. She didn't want her friends to guess her secret. Not until she figured out the best way to tell them. And right now she didn't have time—she didn't want to be late for soccer practice.

She said good-bye, grabbed her pool bag, and headed toward the exit. There was no running allowed in the pool area, so Taylor just walked as quickly as she could. The hot cement burned her feet, but she didn't put on her flip-flops until she reached the big metal gates at the entrance. Then she paused long enough to slip them on.

She spotted a familiar bright blue car as soon as she stepped through the gates. The car belonged to the Kents' housekeeper, Gloria. Both of Taylor's parents had busy jobs, so Gloria was the one who drove Taylor around during the day. Luckily, Taylor could walk to the swim club from

her house, so Gloria didn't have to drive her there. Taylor was also allowed to walk to Kara's house or to the ice-cream parlor as long as she told Gloria where she was going and called when she got there. But her soccer league met on a field at the high school, which was a couple of miles away at the edge of town.

Taylor stepped out onto the gravel parking lot. She had to walk carefully so no gravel would get between her toes.

"Put your towel on the seat," Gloria said when Taylor opened the car's back door. "You're soaking wet."

Taylor didn't think that was true. In fact, her hair and bathing suit were almost dry. But she did as Gloria said and spread her towel on the backseat before she got in. It was always easier to do as Gloria said.

Gloria started the car. Then she looked at Taylor in the rearview mirror. "You all right, *chica*?" she asked. "You look a little down."

Taylor usually made a joke when Gloria called her *chica.* She knew that *chica* was just a Spanish word for "girl." But she always pretended she thought Gloria was calling her a chicken.

Today, however, Taylor wasn't in a joking mood. She hated keeping secrets from her friends. Now, suddenly, she found herself with a big one. And it definitely wasn't the kind that would be easy to share.

"I'm okay," she said. "Hey, Gloria, I was just wondering something. Are you afraid of anything?"

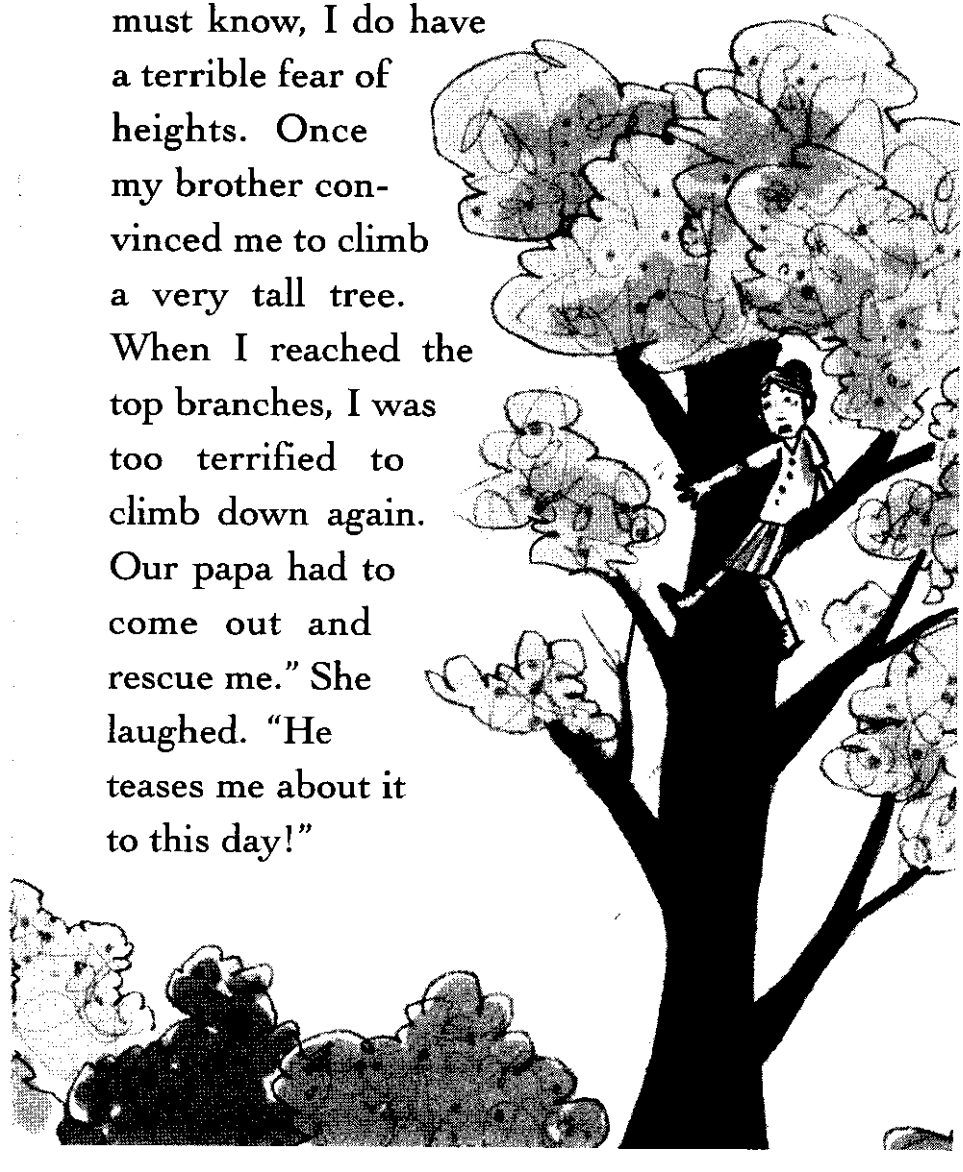
Gloria stopped the car at a stop sign. Then she glanced back at Taylor again. "Me, afraid?" she said. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason," Taylor said quickly. She wasn't ready to tell anyone what was worrying her. "I was just curious."

She already felt a little bit silly for asking. Gloria wasn't the type of person to be afraid of anything. She was always telling

stories about all the crazy things she and her brother had done while growing up in Puerto Rico.

"Oh." Gloria shrugged. "Well, if you must know, I do have a terrible fear of heights. Once my brother convinced me to climb a very tall tree. When I reached the top branches, I was too terrified to climb down again. Our papa had to come out and rescue me." She laughed. "He teases me about it to this day!"



"Really?" Taylor grinned. It was funny to imagine Gloria, with her carefully pressed clothes and neat black and gray bun, clinging to the branches of a tree. "So you were really afraid?"

"I was really afraid," Gloria said. "I also don't like looking out windows in tall buildings or driving over large bridges. I know it's silly, but those things always make me feel dizzy and anxious."

"Wow." Somehow, hearing that even someone as sensible as Gloria had silly fears made Taylor feel a tiny bit better about her own secret.

"I'll tell you something else that frightens me," Gloria said. "It's that you won't have your soccer clothes on by the time we get to the field."

"Oops!" Taylor realized they were almost there. She grabbed the bag of clothes on the car floor and pulled on her shorts and T-shirt over her swimsuit. She was still