

## Spies

“Let’s do something,” I say at last. “Go exploring.” It is a hot, sticky morning. All of us bored, in need of distraction.

“No. *Spying.*” Taylor, piping up with an even better idea. A natural born leader. So sure of herself--just turned twelve and “developing”, as her mother put it. Growing up faster than the rest of us. I worship her. The others, Paul and Travis, are mere followers. They do anything we say.

We wander away from the campsite. Escaping the jealous, prying eyes of parents. Someone calls after us, the usual reminders to *be careful, don’t go too far, watch out for cars.* We ignore them. Taylor is out in front with me, as usual, right beside her. Paul and Travis hang further back so they can talk about childish things, stuff that me and Taylor can’t be bothered with.

We slow down every time we come to another campsite. Checking for kids our age, on the look-out for anything out of the ordinary.

Taylor is wearing her green two-piece bathing suit again. Despite her parents’ demands that she *cover up*, at least when walking around in public. Her fierce independence in the face of their disapproval is yet another source of wonder to me, one

more reason to admire her. She isn't the least bit intimidated by her mother and father (though they seem terrifyingly strict compared to my folks).

Without warning, Taylor veers off the main road, taking a path through the woods. I fall in behind her, Paul and Travis trailing after us. I am mesmerized by her bare shoulders and tanned, lightly freckled back. She makes good progress through the reaching underbrush. My bare shins are soon scratched raw by thorns and I stub my toe hard on a buried root.

Taylor pauses. We wait until she satisfies herself that we can safely proceed. My gaze drops to her calves, ankles and sandaled feet.

I am only a few months shy of my twelfth birthday and I don't feel the same as I used to. I'm madly in love with Taylor—but it is not a pure, sweet, innocent love. Lust is starting to confuse the issue. I know it is a doomed infatuation, a stupid crush (God, how I *hate* that word). Loving your cousin, after all, is wrong, impossible, *sick*—though for reasons I don't entirely understand.

But I do know that I am not a *child*, like Travis or Paul. I understand things that are simply beyond their comprehension. My mother says I'm "sensitive" but it's more than that. I watch and listen, fade into the background. That's how I uncover the truth, family secrets and old feuds that would never be discussed if they knew a kid was around. My grandfather detests Uncle Fred for being a lush. Aunt Bonnie and Uncle George like to flirt with each other. And that pretty much everyone strongly disapproves of Aunt Amelia and her "partner" but no one is willing to confront them.

“Why do they call Jane her ‘partner’?” I asked my mom as she made up my bed in the trailer our first night there. She glanced back over her shoulder at me and took her time replying.

“It’s kind of complicated, Den.” She kept fiddling with the top sheet. Once I realized I wasn’t getting any more out of her, I returned my attention to my mug of hot cocoa and the *Simpsons* comic book I was reading for the millionth time.

*Something* is going on. Amelia and Jane are causing a lot of tension in our family and I need to know *why*. They seem to get along well, are very considerate to one another—why shouldn’t they be friends?

The path Taylor has chosen goes past the bathrooms. You can smell them from a mile away. The trail takes us to another thin road and another line of campsites. Now we are definitely among strangers and Taylor seems to hesitate.

“Slow down,” she hisses. I turn and gesture to Paul and Travis, interrupting an animated discussion on *Yu-Gi-Oh* tactics. Taylor leads us down the road, whispering for us to keep our eyes open.

At one of the campsites, an old guy sits on a fold-out chair. He’s strumming a guitar and singing a song I recognize from church. We wave as we pass.

The next two spots are empty. And then we hear activity from inside the nearest trailer, voices and laughter. Taylor raises a painted fingernail to her lips. She glances around, making sure the coast is clear. We creep closer until we’re right next to the trailer. I look over and see Taylor grinning, her eyes bright and excited.

“—hour it’ll be too hot for this.” A woman, giggling.

“Perfect timing. Then we can go for a swim.”

“Well, c’mon then, big boy.” A rustle. “Let’s find out if you’re all talk and no action.” The trailer creaks. “Ah! Watch my shoulders, dear, they’re still tender from yesterday.” More rustling. “Oh. Oh, that’s nice.”

“You smell like coconut.”

“I hear it's an aphrodisiac.” I don’t know what that means. Now there is some bumping going on as they move around, small collisions above us.

“Ohhh, yes. That’s...that’s good.” The woman giggles again. The giggling type, like Aunt Bonnie. “We’ll have to thank the Johners for taking Joey with them.”

“We’ll do the same for them sometime.” They both laugh. “Although that probably won’t be necessary.”

“Can you imagine them doing it?” This time her chuckle sounds more like a growl. “The thought of fat Randy and poor Marla—”

Taylor’s face is shiny with sweat. She’s unaware of me...or anything else except what is taking place in the camper. It is a yellow and white Jayco unit that’s almost identical to the one my parents own.

I look back at Travis, who mouths “What are they doing?” I just smirk, although in actuality I have only a vague hunch. The voices and sounds are coming from what I know is the main bedroom compartment. The people inside are only a foot or two away. The window is open, just a transparent screen separating us from the couple

Then there are even stranger sounds and I feel my face getting redder and redder. This is *wrong*. I want to leave. But Taylor looks completely hypnotised. Like she’s under a spell.

“Come on, baby,” the woman urges. “Come on—”

Voices coming from up the road, people approaching. I pluck at Taylor's arm, alerting her to this new threat. She snaps out of her trance. Takes charge, leading a noiseless retreat away from the trailer, the rest of us following like mice.

I can't read the look on her face. What it means. Travis and Paul are whispering back and forth, puzzling over what just occurred. I maintain a mature and thoughtful silence. Taylor glances over at me and we exchange smiles. Recognizing that we've shared something truly special, something we will never forget. It's like we've been initiated into a new and secret world.

Remembering the sounds they made. Imagining what they were doing. "R" rated thoughts. Not suitable for children.

After lunch, Taylor asks if I want to go for a walk. Happily, she doesn't invite Paul and Travis along. I'm worried, at first. Does she intend to go back to that same trailer? But instead she heads in the opposite direction. Which is a relief—but I'm also disgusted with myself for being so chicken.

The day has grown hotter but at least it's not as muggy. The sun is almost directly overhead, blazing down on us as we make our way to the beach. Since it's the middle of the week, the campground is half-empty. We have the beach pretty much to ourselves, except for some teenagers playing a loud game of volleyball down by the water.

Taylor spreads out her towel, angling it to take advantage of the sun's rays. While I squat down beside her, she props herself up on her elbows, closing her eyes against the glare. She's so beautiful, I *have* to look at her. Posing like a movie star.

After a few minutes, she turns to me and says, almost shyly: “I want to tan my back, okay?”

Before it dawns on me what she means, what she’s going to do, she’s already doing it. Reaching behind her neck and tugging the string that secures the top of her bathing suit. I turn away as she lowers herself to her stomach. “Let me know if you see anyone coming. I mean,” she adds, “someone we *know*.”

I nod meekly. I’m afraid if I say anything, my voice will squeak.

“This doesn’t bother you, does it?” I shake my head, still keeping my eyes elsewhere. Afraid to look. Afraid I won’t be able to *stop* looking. My cheeks feel flushed, I must be glowing bright red. I hide my embarrassment by pretending to be interested in the volleyball game—which seems to be petering out, the two teams bad-mouthing each other, exchanging shoves. All in good fun.

“What did you think?” she asks and at first I’m not sure what she means. “Did it make you feel bad? Listening in like that?” Now I understand. Shake my head again. “I found it *fascinating*.” Fascinating. Yes, I think to myself, that’s the perfect word for it. “They try to hide that stuff from kids, pretend they don’t do it, that they’re so pure and so...so...”

“Yeah.” I know exactly what she means.

“But we know. We’re not stupid.” She adjusts the position of her top--a risky maneuver, under the circumstances.

I turn my body until I’m facing in the opposite direction.

“Your mom and dad do it, mine do. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I hear them sometimes,” I surprise myself by saying. One more secret between us.

“Sure you do,” she mutters, raising up slightly and squinting at me. “They make enough noise at it.” She snickers. “And it’s not like *we* don’t think about it too. It’s natural.”

The teenagers collect their gear and head toward us. Taylor acknowledges their approach but doesn’t bother covering up. The older kids eye us and one of the boys mumbles something that makes the others laugh. I hate them but they soon pass by.

Some clouds have moved in and take turns blocking the sun. Taylor curses. She curses a lot around me. “No point in this.” She reaches to hold her top in place and raises up until she’s sitting with her back to me. “Can you...” She lifts her dark hair and I move closer, fumbling with the thin ties until I manage a loose, clumsy knot. She looks over her shoulder at me, so *gorgeous* that I forget to breathe. “You’re my favourite cousin, Den,” she says. And there’s this pause--one incredible, timeless moment when the universe seems filled with possibilities, a million bright futures opening up before us.

*So close. I can feel her breath on my face.*

“Guess we should be getting back,” she finally says.

All at once I can hear the waves again and feel dry grit between my toes. I’ve got a slight headache and I’m thirsty. *The dream is over.* Everything back in sharp focus. The sudden return of harsh, unforgiving reality.

She shakes out the towel and wraps it around herself.

Even though the sun, I notice, chooses that moment to emerge from the clouds.

The last day, the adults take charge. They've been ignoring us up to now. Suddenly, there are planned activities: boring boat rides and group hikes. A big, communal supper at my grandparents' campsite, everyone pooling their food. There aren't many opportunities to get away.

Just after supper something happens. There are raised voices, Aunt Amelia and Jane stalking off in a huff. They load their car in silence, ignoring my mother's efforts to make peace. They leave just as it's getting dark.

Taylor is slumped in a camp chair, pouting about something, showing no interest in events taking place around her. Travis and Paul are inside the trailer, playing a board game, their high-pitched laughter a constant annoyance. When I ask permission to go for a walk, my mother barks at me. I flop into a chair opposite Taylor, trying to get her to meet my gaze so we can exchange secret, knowing glances.

She ignores me.

Uncle Fred, whose company I normally welcome, takes a seat beside me. "Hey, hey, Denny-boy." He's already half-plastered. "Howsa boy?" He punches my shoulder playfully, painfully. "What d'you say? Huh? Gonna cheer for my Bruins this year?" I look across helplessly at Taylor. Decide to use the ol' wall of silence on him. Fred eventually takes the hint. Digs into a nearby cooler for a beer and goes off in search of better company. My grandfather glares at him as he edges past.

Abruptly, Taylor announces that she isn't feeling well. She wants to go back to their camper to lie down. I watch her leave, alert for any indication, the slightest hint that she wants company. She gives no such sign and I sag back in the chair.

In the morning, we'll be busy packing up and I likely won't have a chance to see her. My parents will be short-tempered, anxious to be on their way. Then the farewell ritual, the usual crap, *nice seeing you, keep in touch, see you next year.*

Will Taylor make the slightest effort to re-establish contact? Will she hug me...or will my cowardice today cost me even that? A casual nod will destroy me. All I want is acknowledgment, something that confirms I'm special in her eyes. Not just some brat whose company she had to tolerate over four hot days in Greenwater Park.

I sleep badly that night, knowing that in the morning my worst fears will likely be realized. I'm sick with anticipation. A dozen different scenes act themselves out in my head. I finally settle on one where I somehow get her alone and kiss her. Tell her I love her and everything. We become penpals and write sexy notes to each other in our own special code. I see her nearly every summer afterward and she becomes a lifelong friend, my great, unrequited love.

It's the perfect outcome. And it would sure brighten up the drive home. I'd be all proud of myself for not jamming out. *How surprised she was when I put my arms around her. Taylor was taller than me and had to sort of lean down. She kept her eyes closed and lips pressed tightly together. I smelled wood smoke in her hair and tasted bubblegum-flavoured lip balm. Afterward, we swore a sacred oath of secrecy and fidelity to each other and exchanged addresses. Holding hands as we drifted back to camp. Taking the long way and never mind if we were already late.*

*End*

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