



THE HEART OF A HERO

SUSAN MAY WARREN



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© 2020 by Susan May Warren

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CHAPTER 1

IN THE DAYLIGHT, Jake Silver wasn't the devil.

He didn't hear the screams.

Didn't smell the pungent residue of gun smoke tinging the air.

Didn't destroy lives.

In the daylight, he was just Uncle Jake, the guy who knew how to fly.

Jake tucked his feet into the toe straps in the trampoline of his Hobie 16 catamaran and glanced at the sky.

A perfect day. Blue skies overhead, a high in the low eighties, a scattering of cirrus that lent just enough shadow to escape the July heat.

This morning, when Jake rose, gulping back a familiar scream, his body sheened with sweat, the sunrise had cast a glaze over the platinum water that lapped the fifty feet of shoreline of his parents' lakeside home, leaving a beckoning trail of brilliant orange-and-golden sun. He'd had no choice but to surrender to the lure and drag out his cat, hopefully before the crazies hit the lake with their high-powered ski boats that dragged wakeboarders through the chop of Lake Minnetonka.

Deceiving, maybe, but the cool blue suggested a quietness that

might calm the buzz that hummed right under his skin. Always, but especially since he'd come down from Denali a week ago.

No. Since he'd taken down a terrorist in the lobby of the Summit Hotel in Anchorage, Alaska.

A clean shot. A good kill.

But it awakened the demons.

Jake's plan was easy—keep outrunning them. And for the last hour he'd heard nothing but the wind, felt the sun kiss his face, casting deep into his soul. The fragrance of the lake—brine and seaweed, the fishy scent of bass and sunnies that lived in the shallows—seasoned the air.

Yes, Jake could die happily out here, in the water, away from everything that landlocked him.

He guessed the wind at about 10 knots, enough for a sweet joyride from one side of the lake to the other, past the massive million-dollar homes that edged the shoreline.

He glanced over at the little girl sitting beside him. "How ya doin', kid?"

Ten-year-old Aggie Jones wore her dark blonde hair in two tight braids down her back under a Twins ball cap his mother had found for her, along with a swimsuit and life jacket. He'd clipped her to the trapeze so she wouldn't fly off should they catch a gust, but she sat on the lip of the trampoline, her feet tucked into the toe straps, gripping the edge.

Like she'd been sailing her entire life.

Now she looked at him and nodded. No grin, but he didn't expect one. She might not even understand him. Aggie Jones hadn't spoken a word since her father found her in Italy a week ago.

Of course, Hamilton hadn't even known his daughter existed until he received a call from the air force base in Sigonella. The only survivor of a yachting accident, Agatha Jones was found by

the Italian coast guard amidst the debris on shore. Although she identified herself to the American doctor serving at the clinic, she clammed up the minute Ham showed up.

Hadn't said a word since. Just clutched her only possession, a grimy unicorn that had weathered the crash.

Ham was getting desperate. But the kid just needed time. After all, she'd just lost her mother. Jake knew what it felt like to have your entire world ripped out from under you. Hence his suggestion that Ham and Aggie join Jake and the Silver clan for today's Fourth of July picnic.

When Jake had spotted Aggie up early, sitting in the sunroom, he'd invited her on his morning cruise. Asked permission from Ham, who'd spent way too long mulling over the answer.

Ham was out of his element for the first time in his life. Poor guy—the man could plan an op against a Taliban stronghold, execute and extract key prisoners, and escape through the mountains. But he didn't know how to talk to a ten-year-old.

Worse, he was shaken by the fact that the woman he'd married had escaped the bombing that he thought had taken her life.

That she'd borne him a child.

That she'd spent the last decade in hiding.

And that he'd been too late, again, to save her life.

Yeah, Ham had his own regrets to run from. A snarl of unspoken confusion. And not that Jake knew much about kids, but being the favorite uncle of his sister's rascals, he knew that sometimes you just had to stop trying so hard.

Probably advice he needed to give to himself. Let it go, let it go, according to his twin nieces, Lola and Darcy.

Someday, maybe.

"Hang on, sweetheart," Jake said now. "We're going to fly the hull!"

The cool spray of the water glistened on his surf shirt as he let out a little on the jib sheet. The catamaran rode up, skimming across the waves on the opposite hull. He held the tiller and the mainsheet in his left hand, controlled the jib sheet with his right, the sails on a broad reach.

“Woohoo!” He glanced again at Aggie. No smile as she hung on, her braids flying.

Tough crowd.

The cat rose to a forty-five-degree angle, nearly past the point of no return as they sliced through the waves. A few ski boats bobbed in the distance in Smith’s Bay, one of the favorite wakeboarding spots. He’d probably be buzzing his two nephews through it later today, or maybe farther, under the bridge and into Crystal Bay.

Now, he kept heading west, toward Big Island, along the shoreline of St. Louis Bay. The wind burned his ears, and he pulled in the jib as the cat picked up even more speed.

Yeah, this day had all the makings of a restart. Erase the crazy two weeks he’d spent nearly dying on Denali. And maybe too, stop obsessing over the fact that every time he found something good, he managed to screw it up with his stupid, impulsive behavior.

Like the fact that he’d finally met a woman—*the* woman—and . . . well, he wasn’t sure what happened, but the fact that the last time he’d seen her she was practically *running* from him should tell him that hadn’t quite worked out.

Let it go, let it go . . .

Today was the day of freedom. New starts. Taming the wind and moving on.

The jib caught a gust and the cat jerked.

He needed more control. Or maybe it was simply the call of the wind, but he shouted at Aggie, “Stay put!” Then, Jake scooted out and braced his feet on the edge, letting the trapeze hold him as he

leaned out over the water. Pulling in the jib, he slowed them just enough for him to set his feet, then let the sail out again.

The wind grabbed him, shot the hull up.

He was flying, water spraying up, his body hanging over the water.

Hooyah.

Better than sky jumping, better than diving, hanging ten on his cat made him feel like Aquaman, master of the waves.

A noise breached the wind and he looked down to see Aggie looking up at him.

Was that a smile? It turned her entire countenance to sunshine and light, her blue eyes luminous. Wow. Jake thought she looked like Ham when she was serious, all intensity and focus, but when she smiled, Jake saw the man who'd led and inspired SEAL Team Three for the better part of a decade. A person of strength and hope.

The kid just might be okay, if they all played this right.

Jake grinned back at her. "Fun, right?"

She nodded.

Well, well.

He angled them around a fishing boat and into the wide-open chop of Lower Lake South.

Jet skiers chased him down the shore, lifting their hands. Early wakeboarders had arrived, surfing behind double-engine boats churning up wake.

A chilly breeze made him glance behind him. A brouhaha of black clouds gathered at the far eastern end of the lake, rolling like fists over the horizon, tumbling his direction. And judging by the sheet of dark blue, rain.

They still had time, but the way the wind bit the bare skin of his legs with icy teeth, probably he should steer them home.

Besides, if he knew his mother, she'd be waiting with a pile of French toast.

A scream jerked his attention down. Aggie was pointing—

A tuber had cut in front of his cat.

Jake pulled in his line and cut hard with his rudder, just missing them.

They lifted their hand, as if to apologize, but he was busy righting himself, the cat slowing fast.

He danced back to the center, drawing in the main and the jib sheet, and gathered himself, tasting his thundering heartbeat.

Maybe taking Aggie out for a run wasn't the safest idea. But she was looking up at him, still grinning.

Having fun.

And he wanted more of that smile. So he let out the main, coming back around.

Jake moved back, adding more weight and leverage to his hold on the main and jib sheets. There was more chop in the open water, and he had to keep the jib in tight. He wrapped the line around his gloved hand, moving the rudder slightly to head toward St. Albin's Bay, and home.

Their white legacy-farmhouse-turned-stately-home sprawled along the shoreline with a massive lawn that made for excellent youth group parties as a kid. His pastor father had lucked out with his lineage—the only child of a doctor, he'd inherited the family wealth.

They were skimming across the waves again, Jake standing on the flying hull, when he spotted Ham standing on the dock, still too far away to attempt shouting. His short dark blond hair blew in the wind and he wore cargo shorts and a T-shirt, trying to be casual. Jake hoped Aggie kept her smile for him when they docked.

Motorboats cut in front of him, jet skiers jumping their wakes. This time a water-skier raced him across the water.

The lake was turning into a traffic jam.

He had lowered the hull down to skim the waves, pulling in the main when a cruiser—something built for a day on the lake—sped by, churning up a frothy wake.

And right then, the storm gust caught him.

Maybe it was his balance—off from the sudden gust—or even the tumult of waves from the ski boat, but the cat's opposite hull rode up the wave, dipping his side downward—

The water snagged him. Bracing, fast, quick, it sucked him under, stole his breath, stung his bones with the chill.

Not a problem—he was wearing a vest—but attached to the trapeze line, his weight dragged the mast with him. The momentum of their ride catapulted the cat forward.

The mast speared the water and just like that—

They capsized.

End over end, the mast pointed downward, turtling in the water.

The jib wrapped around him, the mast hit his head, and in a second, he was cocooned under the clutter of the lines, the sail, the gear.

Water filled his eyes.

His breath burned in his chest as he unclipped his vest. But the nylon of the sail tangled into his legs and he fought to free himself of the mess.

His lungs burned. *Aggie!*

He finally skimmed his hands down his legs, dove down, and kicked free.

Swimming hard, he surfaced. Breaths razored into his lungs. “Aggie!”

Water chopped over him, and he spat it out, blinking to clear his vision.

No little girl bobbing in the waves. “Aggie!”

She'd been attached to the cat. Which meant when it turned over, she would be caught underneath.

He dove down, under the mess, pushed past the soggy mast, and followed the lines to the trampoline.

She must have fought the trapeze line snagged onto the mast because she was tangled in the lines. Her hands pushed on the mesh of the trampoline, her mouth against the tiniest sip of air between waves.

She looked at him with an expression that could tear out his soul.

"Hang on!" He grabbed her vest and unhooked the trapeze line. Then took a breath and fought with the lines around her legs.

Where was his scuba knife when he needed it?

The cat sank deeper into the water, forcing her under.

She was going to drown.

Not on his watch.

He wrestled with the ropes, his lungs burning.

In BUD/S, the boot camp for SEALs, he'd learned to live without breathing, half-drowning most of the time.

Frankly, it felt like he lived that way his entire life.

But now he was seeing spots, fighting not to let his body take a natural breath.

No—he wasn't leaving.

Her legs came free and he kicked hard, dragging her out by her vest, forcing his jaw shut as he propelled them under the hull.

He shot to the surface. His body gulped air, his lungs searing.

She wasn't breathing, her body limp in the water.

"No! C'mon!"

Please, God!

Then, suddenly, she coughed.

A motorboat sped up and he heard a splash.

Aggie started to cry. Such a blessed, wonderful sound Jake wanted to cry too. She covered her face with her hands, still coughing, crying.

“Give her to me!” Ham was in the water. He grabbed his daughter, such a wrecked expression on his face that Jake felt ill.

The boat came closer and Jake looked up to see his buddy North leaning over the side. “I got her, Ham.”

Ham didn’t seem to want to give her up—Jake could hardly blame him—but Ham lifted her to North, who grabbed her arms and pulled her into the boat.

Ham swam around to the back and hoisted himself up on the deck without a ladder.

Jake treaded water, watching as Ham scooped his daughter into his embrace.

Her arms went around his neck.

Then, Jake watched the bravest man he knew sink down into a seat, trembling.

“You okay, bro?” North said. “Need some help with that?” He wore a blue GoSports T-shirt, his dark brown hair slicked back, a pair of Oakleys on a lanyard on his head. He nodded toward the capsized catamaran. It lay spent, the mast spired down into the depths.

Oh, this would be fun. “No. Take Aggie in. She probably needs to go to the ER and get checked out. See if she has water in her lungs. Don’t worry about me. This is my mess. I’ll clean it up.”

North considered him a moment. “I’ll be back.” He sped off.

And as if on cue, the skies opened up and started to weep. Rain spat upon the water, and thunder rolled in the distance.

Jake grabbed the hull of his sunken ship, not sure how to rescue it from the depths.



Inside, Dr. Aria Sinclair was running.

“Dr. Sinclair, are you okay?”

No. Aria stood under the shower in the locker room of Methodist Hospital, her hands braced against the tile, her head down as the water sluiced over her plastic cap. “I’m okay, Devon. You don’t have to follow me into the bathroom.”

Nothing she said to her resident was going to change the fact that little Leo Richter had died.

Her patient. Her procedure. Her fault.

“It’s a unisex locker room and I’m not following you. I mean, not completely . . .” Devon’s voice slipped through the steam as heat rose, soaking into her bones.

No matter how long she stood here, she couldn’t wash away the haunting wails of Lenae Richter.

Maybe Aria shouldn’t have returned to work so quickly.

Maybe not at all.

“You did everything you could.”

She could imagine him standing in the main locker room area, shouting, dressed in his scrubs, distress on his handsome face.

He’d stood beside her as they tried to console the Richters. But that was over—what else did he want from her?

“You’re a resident, Devon. You’re going to have to get used to this kind of thing.”

She didn’t mean to be harsh, but frankly, that’s what it took to be in this specialty. Pediatric cardiothoracic surgery meant taking chances, sometimes losing lives. Knowing when to move on.

“I know, Dr. Sinclair. I was just . . . wondering how you are.”

“I’m fine.” These things happened.

Except, well, it *wasn’t* supposed to happen.

She hadn’t exactly made promises, but this had felt like a win. She might have even . . . relaxed.

Let the victory into her bones.

After all, she had practically pioneered this procedure. A balloon atrial septoplasty, *in utero*. Groundbreaking. Lifesaving. A procedure she'd refined and published in the *International Journal for Pediatric and Congenital Heart Surgery*. She'd received teaching offers in Sydney, British Columbia, and even Johannesburg. The one from Texas Children's was still sitting on her desk, her acceptance letter in her outbasket.

Number one children's hospital in the world. The next step on her quest to be at the top of her field.

But really, she knew better than to offer hope. Especially since she'd never seen a case so dire in a preterm baby—both interior walls of the heart sealed shut, the main arteries reversed.

If little baby Leo Richter had been born naturally, he wouldn't have lived long enough to make it to the surgical theater to make the repairs.

But he had.

Because she'd convinced Lenae and Jeremy that she could insert a needle through Lenae's womb, right into their baby boy—Leo—and place a balloon in his tiny heart, making a hole that would open the heart's interior wall so oxygenated blood could pass through. He would live long enough for her to give him open-heart surgery to correct his misaligned arteries.

And it worked.

Even the surgery to correct the congenital defect, four days after his birth, worked.

Until it didn't.

"He threw a clot. Pulmonary embolism. We couldn't have stopped it," she said now, for Devon.

"I know." Devon's voice sounded closer. "I just . . . I wanted to make sure *you* knew."

And with his words, Aria just wanted to sink down, into the corner, and weep. “I know, Devon. I know. Go home.”

It wasn’t her first loss. Not by far. The deaths were brutal but sometimes expected in her specialty.

But on top of everything else—

“Aria, come out and talk to me.”

Not Devon’s voice this time. This male voice belonged to Dr. Lucas Maguire, chief of surgery.

“Lucas? What are you doing here?”

“Come out and I’ll tell you.”

So, Lucas was worried too.

Worried, because he was her boss.

Worried, because he was the husband of her best friend.

Worried, probably because only a week ago, she’d nearly lost her life on a mountain.

Maybe she had no business operating on baby Leo. Not with her ankle still rocking a splint and her body still exhausted from her twenty days above fourteen thousand feet.

But no one else knew the procedure.

Oh, her arrogance.

He probably should suspend her. She turned off the shower and grabbed her towel. “I’m . . . I’ll be out in a minute.”

She shivered as she pulled on her robe and stepped out into the private dressing cubicle. Her sundress hung from a hook and she pulled it on, grabbed her cardigan, and exited into the mirrored area.

Stripped of makeup, she looked about eighty-two. Fatigue lines etched around her eyes, and as she pulled off the plastic cap, she could definitely see white streaks in her dark hair.

She pulled it back into a messy bun, then threw the towel into the bin and hung her robe in the locker beside her toiletries. Grabbed her satchel.

She needed her bed. A pillow over her head.

The dreamless sleep of the dead.

And maybe when she awoke, she'd find a new day, a fresh start, without drama, disaster, and grief.

Without regret. No, without fears that she would do it—life, medicine, relationships—wrong.

Lucas was waiting in the staff lounge, his back to her. He ripped open a stevia packet and added it to some sludge-slash-coffee. Outside, the night had given way to morning, but rain spat on the windows, a dour, gray greeting.

That felt about right.

Devon sat at a round table, drinking a Diet Coke from the machine. He wore the fatigue lines of the trauma in his face. A handsome man, brown hair, dark skin, beautiful pale green eyes, he'd started his medical career late, after being an army medic for the first five years out of high school. Now, he sat at the table, his scrub hat in his hand, and watched her, his gaze a little too probing.

"What is this, the Spanish Inquisition?"

Lucas didn't smile. "Mmmhmm," he said instead. Over six feet, still built like the former navy doctor he'd been, Lucas wore a beard, his light brown hair cut short, his hazel-brown eyes containing a texture of worry. He was in his street clothes, no scrubs, and it occurred to her that he was supposed to have the day off.

She looked at Devon, then Lucas. "Am I in trouble?"

Lucas frowned.

"The baby threw a clot. It wasn't the procedure—"

"Listen," Lucas said, "Devon filled me in. You spent the night by his bedside and worked on him for over an hour. In front of his parents. I got worried." Lucas walked over and pulled out a formed plastic chair. "Sit."

“I’m buzzing.” She walked over to the coffeepot and poured out the last of the dregs.

“That’ll help.”

“Coffee is my favorite food group.”

“It’s your only food group.” Lucas was still pointing at the chair. He raised an eyebrow.

Fine. She slid onto the chair, dropping her satchel beside her. Glanced at Devon. “You’re as tired as I am. Go home.” She looked away from him, to Lucas. “And I thought you had the day off. Independence Day—you should be celebrating with Sasha.”

“I am. I will. And—that’s why I’m here.”

She took a drink, made a face. “Did one of the new interns make this?”

Lucas tried his coffee. But he’d doctored his with creamer and sweetener, so—

“Oh yeah, that’ll peel hair off.” He set down the coffee. “Listen, I need a favor.”

She scrubbed her hands down her face. Perfect. Dr. Maguire probably needed her to take on his patients while he and Sasha jetted off to another vacation—

Oh, that wasn’t fair. Sasha had nearly died a week ago. Yes, probably they needed a break. Warm shores.

Cancun. Aria let herself laugh, at least on the inside—the joke she shared with Jenny Calhoun and Sasha as they heated snow for water and tried to survive in their flimsy tent as a blizzard socked them in. Next girls’ trip—Mexico.

Outside, the rain was letting up, but an errant wind rattled the window.

Aria shivered, a by-product of spending twenty-one days in subzero temperatures.

“How’s your ankle?” Lucas pulled out another chair for her to prop her foot up.

Tender. Swollen from standing on it for hours.

“It’s fine.”

“It’s not. She took off her brace and limped all the way down here,” Devon said.

She shot him a look. “Go.”

“Stay,” Lucas said.

“What’s the favor?” She didn’t mean to bark at him, but . . .

Okay, she didn’t like herself much lately, to be honest. Didn’t like the fact that she’d nearly done something colossally stupid in Alaska, with a charming guy who probably hadn’t thought about her since she’d practically fled from him. Didn’t like the fact that her sleepless nights had more to do with the memory of Jake Silver’s stupid smile, his charisma, and the way he’d made her feel—

Well, not like the uptight cardiothoracic pediatric surgeon she’d left back in Minneapolis.

She’d lost her mind, just a little, in Alaska—especially around Jake. Embarrassed herself, badly.

Escaped home, trying to find herself again.

Not quite. And baby Leo might have paid the price.

She could be ill, right here, and pressed her hand to her stomach. “Sorry. I’m just tired.”

Lucas was watching her. “You probably have a little PTSD after what happened on the mountain.”

“What happened on the mountain?” Devon said.

“She blew off the top of Denali, is what. She and her team survived a fall down a glacier. Spent three nights on the back side of the mountain and would have died up there if—”

“Hit the showers, Devon.” She looked at Lucas. “Don’t you dare mention his name.”

He startled and she wanted to wince. She'd never win at poker.

"Who? Hamilton Jones?"

Right. Jake's boss, the SAR guy who had led the team who'd found and saved them. She swallowed. Nodded.

"Oh wait . . . you mean Jake Silver."

"Thanks for that."

Lucas grinned and wore a not-so-subtle twinkle in his eye.

"Yeah, I saw you two together. Did something . . . happen there, Doc?"

Almost. And shoot, if God had mercy her face wouldn't heat, wouldn't—

"Wow," Lucas said. "So, that's a yes."

Again, no poker for her.

"We . . . he . . . so, no. Nothing important happened."

Because Jenny, her roommate, had walked in. Right before she'd nearly . . .

And now *she* should probably flee the room.

She sipped her coffee, letting her silence do the work of making Devon leave. He headed for the locker room.

Lucas's tone changed. Softened. "Aria, are you . . . okay?"

She drew in a breath. Her hand went to her neck, to the bare skin there. Made a fist where the missing necklace should be. Right. She didn't have her half of her heart anymore, either.

Thanks for that, Jake.

Probably she should stop blaming the guy for her own bad behavior.

But if she never saw him again, it would be too soon.

"I heard you were offered a job at the Texas Children's Hospital."

She stilled. "You heard about that?"

"It's my job to know. Besides, they called me before they ex-

tended the offer.” He gave her a wry smile. “Head of pediatrics. Teaching, your own grant funds for research. And you haven’t said yes yet?”

She drew in a breath. “I am. I will. I—”

“Is that what you really want?”

His question brought her up. “Yeah. Of course. It’s the next step, right?”

“To where?”

“To . . . well . . . just the next step.”

He nodded and took a sip of coffee.

“I mean, that’s the goal, right? To be the best?”

He set down his cup. “You tell me.”

She frowned. Shook her head. “Well, yes, I’m going to take the job. I just . . . I just need to get my feet under me is all. I’m just feeling—”

“Like you lost your mojo.”

She stared at him. “No. I . . . I’m fine—”

“I know. That’s why you’re going to the beach,” Lucas said quietly.

Oh. She raised an eyebrow. “I, no . . . *what?*”

“Key West. I signed you up to speak at a Cardiology and Pulmonology for Primary Care conference.”

“I’m not prepared—”

“Of course you are. You eat and breathe the balloon atrial septoplasty. Just show up and talk.”

“My patient *died*, Lucas. I don’t want to talk about it.”

He made a grim line with his mouth. “I know. But it was still another landmark surgery . . .”

And now her eyes filled. She was just tired. So . . . tired. “He should have lived.”

Lucas didn’t move.

“Maybe I wasn’t ready to come back.”

“You’re one of the best, Aria. Talented. But you need a break.”

“I can’t go to Key West.”

“Yes, you can,” Lucas said. “I’ll take your patients. Devon can fill me in. You still have vacation time, and frankly, as your boss, I’m telling you that you’re going.”

She got up, picked up her coffee, and limped over to the trash can. Oops, she probably shouldn’t have sat down. Now her ankle burned, and the idea of taking a week off— “How long is the conference?”

“Just two days, but my travel agent booked the resort for a week.”

No. *Really*. No.

“You could sleep the entire week.”

She glanced at Lucas. “I don’t—”

“Sleep? I know, Aria. You’re the hardest-working—”

“Need a vacation.”

“You’ve needed a vacation since I met you. You take vacations that you need vacations from, for crying out loud. And your last vacation”—he finger-quoted the words—“tried to kill you. Listen, I’ll help you cheat. You have to work before you get to play. That should satisfy the perfectionist workaholic in you.”

He probably didn’t mean for his words to sting but . . . okay, maybe.

But people given second chances had a responsibility to *do* something with their lives.

Devon emerged from the locker room wearing a pair of jeans and a black T-shirt, smelling good.

Lucas got up. “Your plane ticket is already purchased. Flight leaves on Friday—”

“Next week?”

“In two days.”

“Lucas!”

“No one is going to die without you.”

She knew he didn’t mean for it to sting. But, *ouch*.

Devon came back to the table. “I’ll fill Dr. Maguire in on your patients, and you can call me anytime to check on things. You already have my number.”

Outside, the rain had stopped, sunshine streaking through the gray clouds, burning away the gloom.

Maybe she did need sunshine. Beach.

And about two thousand miles between her and her regrets.

Namely a six-two, blond former SEAL who lived somewhere in Minneapolis. A city big enough for her to avoid him. Forever.

Please, God.

And maybe a break would help her shake free of her recent string of disasters.

Find her mojo again, as Lucas said.

Help her say yes to Texas.

“Now, here comes the bad news,” Lucas said.

“What? Tickets to Disneyland? Or better, you’re buying me a house.”

“Funny. Sasha sent me to pick you up. We’re going to a party.”

“No, I—”

“Jenny’s back from Alaska with Orion. She texted Sasha and invited us to a Fourth of July party. On the lake.” Lucas came over to her and eased her satchel off her shoulder. “With cake.”

“I don’t like cake.”

“Everybody likes cake.”

She sighed.

“I can’t go home empty-handed. Help a guy out here.”

She winced, pressing her thumb and forefinger into her eyes.

“Devon, come with us. You need a break too.”

What—no! But she looked up just as Devon nodded.

“Great. Let’s go.” Lucas stood up. “I promise, you’re going to have a great time, whether you like it or not.”

She’d bet on not.