

The whole crew is out on the lake to celebrate July 4th, but the holiday doesn't turn out the way they planned...

Because the Harvilles and John Benwick planned to leave for California right after the Fourth of July holiday weekend, Stuart and Virginia Pendleton decided to invite everyone on a two-day, houseboat excursion. The weather promised to be hot and sunny, so Dylan and James said they would also bring their motor boats along for skiing.

"I'm terrible at skiing," Carrie pouted. "It's all I can do to get up on two skis. I'm not like Stu, who can ski on one. Even Heather's better than me."

"I don't know about that," Heather answered. "I haven't skied on one in a few years. I might have forgotten how."

"It's like riding a bike; you never forget," James reassured her. She beamed at him in return.

"Do you ski a lot in California?"

"Yeah, we go when we can."

"I'm sure you'll do fine, Carrie," Virginia encouraged her as she packed a cooler into the ski boat. "I'm going to ride in the houseboat with Stu, Eric, Millie, Susan and Gary." She counted them on her fingers as she listed each one. "Dylan, Crosby and Spring will take Dylan's boat and meet us at the campground, and John's going with James and the girls in his boat. What do you want to do, Laurel?"

"I don't care. I'll ride with you . . ."

"Why don't you ride with us?" John asked as he approached the boat with a slalom ski under one arm and a couple of life jackets under the other.

"You know the lake better than any of us; you can make sure we don't get lost on the way."

"Sure, if you like."

"Great, that's settled, then." John gave her an affable smile. They had developed a comfortable friendship over the last several days, and the results were not lost on Eric Harville. A few nights before, he had pulled Laurel aside and said low in her ear, "I don't know what you said to John that night at James's house, but whatever it was, I'm

eternally grateful to you. He's been better this past week than I've seen him in months — since Fiona got sick."

"I'm sure it was nothing you hadn't said to him before. Sometimes it just takes an objective person from outside the situation to validate a close friend's opinion."

"You're a wonder, Laurel Elliot. Why hasn't some lucky guy snapped you up yet?"

"You know, I wonder that myself sometimes." She laughed, not completely at ease but better. Now that she knew James's true opinion of her, she was doing her best to let go of the past and her lingering feelings of regret. She patted Eric on the shoulder and went into the other room before he could read too much into her expression.

Now, she told herself, she hadn't a care in the world. The boat ride was marvelous, and in the bright morning sunshine, the five of them looked like something out of a beer commercial. John drove with James sitting beside him at shotgun, and the Pendleton sisters stretched out on the side seats, sunning themselves. Laurel lounged along the rear seat, reading the new John Grisham novel. She might not be as sexy as the Pendleton girls were in their bikinis, but she felt pretty enough in her violet one-piece and the gauzy cover-up tied about her waist. That feeling was validated when she saw James's aviator-covered eyes turned her way. His mouth hung slightly open and she tilted her head to the side as if to ask 'What?' He closed his lips with a snap, sat up and turned toward the front, pointing out something in the landscape to John.

On the way to the campground, they all took turns skiing. Laurel had already been out a few times with Dylan and Crosby that summer, so she was fine after a couple of initial spills. John was charged with spotting for a while, but then he grew tired of watching the others and offered to drive. Carrie did her stint on two skis, just barely making it up and quickly signaling that she was ready to stop. Heather clamored for her turn, so James and John obliged her next.

"I want to slalom ski," she insisted.

"Are you sure you want to try that right off the bat?" James asked while helping adjust the straps of her life jacket. "Two's a little easier, especially if you haven't been on skis in a while."

"No, I can do one." She threw the ski in the water behind the boat and jumped after it. As she wrestled with putting her left foot in, he called to her, "Not so tight on the boot. You want your foot to come out of it if you take a spill."

"I don't like the way it slips around on my foot."

James shook his head but said nothing. John moved forward slowly, tightening up the rope. She grabbed the handle when it reached her, and the boat pulled her slowly through the water.

Laurel and Carrie shielded their eyes from the sun and watched as Heather tucked her right knee behind her left and curled into a little ball in preparation. She gave the thumbs-up, and John punched the gas. She disappeared behind the water spray for about ten seconds, but then she popped up to the surface — a brilliant smile on her face. The three of them clapped and shouted as she got her bearings and leaned back.

James signaled to ask her whether the speed was okay. *Faster!* she gestured, and John increased his speed accordingly. She was doing well and started to swing out over the wake, but she hesitated and drifted back behind the boat. She gestured again — *Faster!*

"She wants me to go faster?" John asked, incredulous.

"She just thinks she does." James shook his head no, but Heather insisted, signaling again — *Faster!*

James rolled his eyes. "Fine! Speed up."

John tossed him a wary look. "I don't know, James."

"That's what she wants; let her have it."

John bumped up his speed, and Laurel turned back from her spotting post. "Maybe you should slow down, John," she shouted over the whine of the boat motor.

James shrugged. "She said she wanted to go faster."

Laurel turned back around and resumed watching Heather, who responded by giving the okay signal. She was growing braver by the minute, moving from side to side, and expertly jumped the wake. As she picked up momentum and swung around almost beside the boat, Laurel scanned ahead of her for debris in the water that John, who was concentrating on driving, might miss. Suddenly, Heather swept back across the wake, racing to the opposite side.

Laurel saw the log, but her shout of warning was a second too late. She whirled around to get Heather's attention, but her frantic gestures were futile. Heather never heard her or saw it coming. The next few seconds went by in sickening, slow motion. Heather hit

the log and catapulted into the air, the rope flying out beside her. She crashed onto the surface of the water and somersaulted end-over-end as Laurel watched in horror. Then, with a terrific spray of blue-green water, she disappeared.