

chapter 14

a vision of beauty

"What? Is she waving at me?"

As the summer moved along, I was out on the lakes with a new group every week. I wasn't in base camp very often, usually just two or three days at a stretch. On my days off, I either caught up on my sleep or I went out on short trips on my own time.

After the trip with the group from Milwaukee, my parents came up for an overnight on Diamond Lake. I was also planning a three-day trip with my uncle and two cousins for later in the summer. It was nice to have my family take an interest in my summer job. They'd never been too interested before, so I was enjoying the unexpected attention from back home.

When I was in base camp, I found myself alone much of the time. It was hard to make friends with anyone when I was never there. The staff at camp had bonded quickly, but any friendships I'd begun during staff training seemed to go up in smoke once the actual groups started coming. To my surprise, the best friend I made at Northern Lights was Aria Hunter. Without her, this story would be over by now. But thanks to her, this is where the story really begins.

Aria and I had a way of going at each other lovingly, relentlessly, and sometimes toxically, ever since that first week of camp when we served together as guides. Aria had just graduated from high school that spring. She had been a camper at Northern Lights in junior high. Ever since then, it had been her dream to work there someday. She couldn't wait to be a canoe guide, so she signed on as a swamper in order to be at camp for the entire summer.

Whenever I was in base camp, we hung out together. She made me feel good about myself. She made me smile. Aria was the only one that summer who could really get under my skin and make me laugh out loud. I'm sure everyone could hear us walking along the trails at camp, with Aria talking a mile a minute, and me just laughing along.

Aria and I were totally different from each other in so many ways. We were from completely different backgrounds. I was a plain white college student from rural Iowa. Aria was a rough-and-tumble teenager from the north side of Chicago. She was three years younger than me, which seemed like a lifetime to me, and she was black too. Her racial makeup and the color of her skin didn't matter one bit. I don't think it was a big deal for anyone else either, but the age difference was. Unfortunately, I think it made our friendship a bit questionable for some people at camp.

The more we hung out together, the more paranoid I became about it. I tried not to think about what others thought or what Aria's parents or my parents might think. I just wanted to enjoy our friendship while it lasted—if it lasted. I didn't care what she looked like, where she came from, or how young she was. I just liked her a lot. I was just surprised at how quickly we clicked and became such good friends.

About four weeks into the summer, Aria and I and a bunch of other camp staff left dinner early and hiked down to the dock by the beach. A large group of visitors was arriving that afternoon, and we'd been called on to serve as the welcoming committee.

Cassie had received word that they were crossing the channel to Northern Lights in the Voyageur canoes. So we hurried down the trail through the woods to greet them. Aria was excited because her friend, Esther, was coming that day with an outdoor adventure group from Chicago. They were planning to be at camp for three weeks to help finish off the construction of a new log cabin on the south side of the main island.

Aria had been talking about Esther a lot as the day of her arrival approached, so I knew a few things about her. Esther was a foreign exchange student from New Zealand. She had been in the United States for the past year, taking classes at the University of Chicago.

That's where Aria met her, in a course on environmental justice, and that's where they became friends. Aria encouraged her to join the outdoor adventure group and then spend some time at Northern Lights before she had to go back to New Zealand.

As we arrived at the beach near the dock, the two big Voyageur canoes were slowly coasting in next to the boat landing. There were about fifty people on board the canoes. They started climbing out with their luggage to be led off to their cabins and get settled in. We watched them from the walkway above the beach, waiting to help the new arrivals with their luggage if necessary.

Suddenly, my eyes caught sight of a beautiful girl, tall and slender, standing in the middle of the chaotic scene below. She had dark red hair, lots of it, thick and long, that fell down below her shoulders in wavy swirls that curled up at the ends. She glowed in the late afternoon sun and appeared to be on fire as the light sifted through the long red locks that hung down almost to her waist.

The girl was wearing a black skintight T-shirt, with a jean jacket over the top, army green capris tied up at the knees, and a pair of rugged black hiking boots. She had on a pair of sunglasses that seemed to match her hair and her dark red lipstick. But the most striking feature of the girl was the wave of light brown freckles that swept across her nose in a beautiful arch from cheek to cheek.

She removed her sunglasses and scanned those of us standing up on the beach. I could see her eyes—deep sapphire blue—surrounded by thick dark eye shadow. They seemed to glow with an intense luminescence, like blue flames of fire. As she stood there with her knapsack flung over her shoulder, she looked intimidating, tough as nails, and even a bit dangerous. I couldn't take my eyes off the girl who appeared so fierce and wild and so out of place, standing in the middle of the crowded mass of people below.

Suddenly, the beautiful redhead raised her arm straight up in the air and waved excitedly. "What?" I thought. "Is she waving at me? Yes, she is!" She was looking directly at me. As she smiled, her face lit up, and I caught a glimpse of her dazzling eyes that seemed to reflect the deep blue sky and green pine trees all around.

I looked around and started to raise my hand to wave back, when suddenly, she called out, “Aria! Aria, it’s me! I made it!”

Aria, who had been standing behind me, shrieked so loudly it made me flinch and double over in surprise. Aria shoved me aside and lunged quickly past. She ran down to the dock, and gave the beautiful redhead a big bear hug. Then she stepped back and smiled at her. “So this is Aria’s friend,” I thought to myself, “Esther, the exchange student she’d met at the University of Chicago.”

I made my way through the mass of people and stood nearby as the two girls caught up on their lives. As I watched them laughing and talking, one word kept popping into my head, “Wow!” Esther seemed even taller up close and more fierce than ever. A cluster of silver necklaces hung down over her shirt. They matched the other jewelry she was wearing: a collection of bracelets, three rings, and a pair of large dangly earrings.

Aria suddenly noticed me standing there. With a jerk of her arm, she pulled Esther over and introduced us. “Leo, this is Esther, my best friend in the entire world! I love her so much!”

Esther extended her hand and said with a smile, “Hey, mate!”

I shook her hand, grinned like a schoolboy, and replied awkwardly, “Welcome to Northern Lights.”

Aria immediately turned back to Esther and gave her a big shove. “I’m so glad you came!” she shouted. “We’re gonna have so much fun! Come on! I’ll take you to our cabin.”

Apparently, my services were no longer needed, so I turned to go. But then Aria barked at me, “Leo!” and pointed to Esther’s luggage on the dock. Like an obedient dog, I picked up her things and followed behind as they bounded away up the trail.

As Aria talked a mile a minute, I analyzed the introduction, thinking about what Esther said, “Hey mate,” and what I said, “Welcome to Northern Lights.” I kicked myself and despaired, “Good grief, Charlie Brown! You could have done better than that!”

I thought about the touch of her warm, soft fingers as we shook hands. I didn’t fully realize it then, but my fascination with Esther had begun the first moment I’d laid eyes on her. I wanted to know more

about her. I wanted to hear what she was saying to Aria up ahead. As I followed along, I took some solace in the fact that I was carrying her backpack, sleeping bag, and pillow in my arms. So basically, I was the bellhop. Whoopee!

At the cabin, I followed the girls inside and dropped the luggage on an empty bunk. Aria continued her mindless chattering. Then as if by accident, she noticed me standing nearby again.

"Thanks, Leo!" she exclaimed. Then she shoved me out the door and cried, "See you at the campfire tonight!"

I stumbled out the door and nearly toppled over into the bushes at the bottom of the steps, twisting my left ankle in the process.

"You're welcome," I muttered as I limped away, a bit hurt at being so rudely excluded like that.

I couldn't think of anything else to do, so I walked back to my cabin. I had been out on the lakes almost every day so far that summer, and I was looking forward to spending a few days in base camp. It would be a nice change of pace. Even so, my heart still yearned to return to the lakes. I knew it wouldn't be long until I got another group and would be out again.

When I got to the cabin, Chuck was there lying on his bunk. He had just returned from a trip with a group of youth. It was the only one he would make all summer. He'd only been out because they were shorthanded that week and needed him to go. He had gladly done it. He didn't especially like being stuck in base camp doing the trail shack job. It was a lot of busywork, packing out the food, making sure everyone got their tents, cook kits, and other gear. I knew where his heart really was—out on the lakes.

I liked Chuck, even though he was a bit rough around the edges. As the summer rolled along, he seemed to be turning into a wild man, ever more hairy, disheveled, and bearded. He hadn't shaved in a long time, and his beard was starting to gobble up his face.

"Hey, Leo," he greeted me, peeking out from under the wide-brimmed hat that was covering his eyes.

"Hey, Chuck," I replied. "Are you going to the campfire?"

"Yup," he replied. "My group's gonna talk about our trip tonight."

“Oh, cool,” I said as I crawled up into my bunk.

He rolled out of his and grabbed a towel. “I’m gonna go take a shower,” he said. “See you at the campfire.”

“Sure, I’ll see you there,” I replied.

On my first day at camp, Chuck had welcomed me warmly, but it didn’t take long to realize he was a man of few words. The time we’d gone out canoe surfing seemed to be a strange anomaly. Since then, our friendship had been limited to just a few sentences at a time, usually only regarding the necessary things in life. I was pretty introverted myself, but he had me beat by a mile.

As Chuck hiked off down the trail into the woods, I relaxed in my top bunk. It was the only place at camp that was my own personal space. I grabbed my old beater guitar like a long-lost friend. Then I leaned back against the bunk rail and picked out a mellow tune. I treasured those quiet moments, just me and my guitar, surrounded by the pine trees, the sparkling water, and the fading light of the sun setting in the west.

Outside, shadows crept across the still waters of the lake below. The sun had fallen below the trees on the ridge overlooking the cabins, but far away to the east, I could still see its light blazing across the lake in the wide bay that separated the islands from the mainland. The red suspension bridge that spanned the two islands burned brightly in the evening light too, but only for a little while. Soon, it also fell into the shadows as the day came to a close.

The voices of people walking on a trail to the south drifted through the trees. Everyone was making their way to the campfire ring in the center of camp. I wanted to stay and play guitar, but I knew I’d best be on my way to the campfire as well. I tossed the guitar on my bunk and slipped out the door.

“I should at least go make an appearance.”