

## chapter 23

# love triangle

*"We need to know which way you want to go."*

The boys and I had a full day of work ahead of us. We dropped off our sleeping bags and personal items at the cabin. Then we hauled our camping gear up to the trail shack. Chuck was there to greet us with a cheerful smile. He swung into action and had those boys cleaning the pots and pans, hanging up the wet packs and tents, and putting away all of our gear in a wild frenzy. Afterward, the boys gave him a big group hug and said their goodbyes.

Then we were off to the sauna. We stopped at our cabin to change into our swimsuits and grab our towels. As we crossed over on the creaky bridge, the boys stopped in the middle to jump up and down just for fun. When we got to the sauna, there was a mad scramble to get inside. As usual, nobody wanted to be the last one.

It was already hot and steamy inside, but I threw another full cup of water on the sizzling rocks just for good measure. I'd been living with those smelly boys all week, and I was excited to finally get rid of the stench that was beginning to seep into my skin. The boys sat in the steamy darkness and soaked up the warmth as they reminisced about their trip of a lifetime in the Boundary Waters.

Suddenly, I heard the voices of Aria and Esther coming down the trail. "Oh no, not again," I thought. "This is the last thing I need right now." But sure enough, the girls opened the door and peeked inside. When they saw nine pairs of beady eyes staring back at them, they laughed and closed the door. As they walked down to the end of the dock, I wondered, "What could they want now?"

“Yo, Leo,” Quincy said, elbowing me in the ribs, “I told you, that girl likes you.”

“Yeah, I heard you,” I replied, trying to avoid another word fight with the bullheaded kid.

As we sat there roasting in the sauna, I fended off another barrage of questions from the curious boys. I tried to play it down, but I had a hunch as to why the girls were there.

“Come on, guys! Let’s go jump in the lake!” I finally said.

“You just wanna see your girlfriend!” Quincy said.

“Maybe I do, maybe I don’t,” I replied. “We’ve gotta get out of here anyway before we all shrivel up and die! Let’s go!”

The whole gang piled out of the sauna and ran down to the end of the dock, where they all jumped in the lake . . . all except for Quincy, that is, who strolled coolly by my side down the long walkway to have a chat with the ladies-in-waiting. Quincy and I both agreed; they looked mighty fine in their swimsuits. When Esther saw us coming, she smiled and gave me a little wave of her hand.

“See, I told you so,” Quincy insisted again.

“You know, Quincy,” I replied smoothly, “I think you’re right. The redhead likes me. But the other one, Aria, she keeps showing up whenever you’re around too.”

“Yeah, so?” Quincy said toughly.

“Well, big guy,” I hinted, “I think she might have a thing for someone else, if you know what I mean.”

“A thing?” he wondered aloud.

“Yeah, I think Aria really digs you,” I replied.

The girls got up and began walking back up the dock toward us. As they passed by, Aria gave Quincy a wink and a smile.

“Hey, little man,” she said, “I’ll see you around.”

That was all it took for Quincy. He tossed his towel up in the air and took off at a dead sprint down to the end of the dock. With a loud, “Whoo-hoo!” he jumped off and did a cannonball into the lake.

“Man, he’s a cute kid,” Aria said, looking me straight in the eyes. “Why do I keep falling for the cute ones?” She gave me a long cold stare that sent a shiver down my spine.

“You just made Quincy’s day,” I said with a nervous chuckle. “That’ll be the highlight of his whole summer.”

“Yeah, I know,” she said with a thin smile. “I have that effect on guys, don’t I, Leo?”

“Um, yeah,” I replied, wondering what she was getting at.

“That little kid sure is cute!” Esther said. “Too bad, he smells like a stinky codfish.”

“Give him a few years. He’s gonna be a real hunk,” replied Aria.

“Like me?” I asked.

“Yeah, right!” Aria exclaimed cynically as she turned to go. “Keep on dreaming, Farm Boy!”

“What?” I said innocently. “What did I say?”

“Come on, Esther, let’s go hop in the sauna,” Aria said as she pulled her friend along up the dock.

“Leo!” she called back to me. “Come up when you get the chance. We need to talk some more.”

“Sure, just give me one sec,” I replied, wondering what was eating at Aria. She seemed more than a bit upset.

Esther glanced back as Aria pulled her along. She smiled and waved at me again. That was all it took for me. I tossed my towel up in the air and took off at a sprint down to the end of the dock, where I did precisely as Quincy had done.

With a loud, “Whoo-hoo!” I leaped off the end of the dock and came crashing down on the boys with my own version of a cannonball belly flop. I could hear them screaming with delight as I came back to the surface. I was screaming too.

After playing in the lake for a while, I got out and asked the lifeguard to watch the boys. Then I ran up the dock and climbed into the sauna. It took a few seconds for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. Aria was sitting on the far side of the room directly opposite from me. Esther sat back against the wall in between the two of us.

A tension hung in the steamy air. Aria didn’t say anything for a long time. She didn’t seem to be her usual self. I wondered what could have happened in the last hour to change her mood. All sorts of possibilities began to swirl around in my head.

The reality of the situation I'd placed myself in suddenly dawned on me. I'd be spending three days in the Boundary Waters with Esther and Aria. It would just be the three of us for three days straight. Aria clearly liked me, but I couldn't stop thinking about Esther, and she was caught somehow in between the two of us. I began to wonder if I really wanted to go on the trip after all.

Aria finally spoke up. "So, Leo, we've got a few more details to talk about in regards to the trip."

"Oh, so that's why you followed me all the way over here to the sauna," I quipped, trying to lighten the mood. "I thought you were just stalking me or something."

"Yeah, right," she said dryly. "We've been stalking you?"

Aria gave me a long blank stare across the dimly-lit room. She was hinting at something that I think we both knew was happening. After another awkward silence, I got up and threw a cup of water on the rocks. I sat back down and watched the steam rise up, avoiding any eye contact with her.

"So, Leo, we need to know which way you want to go," she said.

"Which way? I have no clue," I replied.

"Well, that's pretty obvious, dingbat," she said. "So, you need to decide ASAP."

"Why me?" I asked, getting a bit irritated. The discussion seemed to be turning into an argument on two completely different levels, and Aria wasn't making things any easier.

"Because you're the canoe guide," she replied. "And we need to get an entry permit before we leave. I just need to know which lake you want to put in on, Diamond or Sag?"

"I don't know, Hunter. What's the weather looking like for next week?" I replied, all business.

"It's supposed to be nice all this week," Aria said. "There's a chance of storms next weekend, though."

"That could be an issue," I said, thinking out loud. "Wind or rain could slow us down and really mess things up. We'll just have to go for it and hope for the best."

"So which entry should I get?" she asked again.

“Well, where would you like to go?” I asked.

“I’m fine with whatever,” Aria said, still cold as ice.

I was getting nowhere with Aria, so I turned to Esther and asked, “What would you like to see on our trip?”

Talking to Esther in front of Aria suddenly felt strangely awkward. Aria was watching both of us like a hawk. It was as if she were second-guessing the whole idea of the trip just like me.

Esther didn’t seem to be aware of the tension in the air. She simply said, “Well, I’d like to see some waterfalls and the northern lights, and I’d like to visit Canada too.”

She talked so sweetly in her Kiwi accent. I was excited about the surprise trip, and I was looking forward to getting to know Esther too. I held my excitement in as best as I could. After all, Aria was right there, staring back at me . . . or was she glaring at me? I couldn’t tell. It was difficult to see in the steamy darkness, and I was beginning to sweat up a storm.

Esther spoke up again. “Leo, there’s just one more little thing I was wondering about.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“There’s a lake,” she answered. “I saw it on a map. It’s called Esther Lake, just like my name. I was wondering if we could go there so I could swim in it on my birthday.”

“I know where Esther is,” I said. “But it’s pretty far out there, and we only have three days. I can’t guarantee that we’ll be able to get there and back in time. What day is your birthday?”

“It’s on Friday, the 14th of July,” she said cheerfully. “I’ll be turning twenty-one on that day.”

“Well, we can sure try,” I said with a smile. I suddenly realized that I’d do just about anything to make Esther happy.

She grinned happily and grabbed my hand that was resting on the bench next to her. As she squeezed my hand, I could feel the heat coming from Aria across the way.

“Awesome, Leo!” Esther exclaimed excitedly. She leaned over and gave me a playful nudge with her shoulder. “That would be totally sweet, bro!”

And that just made it worse. Man, it was getting hot in there! I was ready to bail out and go jump in the lake by myself, but the girls weren't ready to let me go, not just yet anyway.

"So, Saganaga it is," Aria said, still staring coldly across at me. "Hopefully, we don't get too much wind like the last time we were up there. Remember that one, Leo?"

"Yeah, it could be bad," I replied.

I knew Aria was referencing the trip we'd done together earlier in the summer. It brought back a ton of great memories. They all flashed before me in a split second, all the good times we had shared on that trip just a few weeks earlier. I glanced up, then quickly back down again, somehow trying to avoid the icy gaze I knew she was giving me from across the darkened room.

"Okay, we'll head north on the big lake first," I said. "We'll hit Monument Portage on the Canadian border and then play it by ear. Hopefully, the weather holds long enough for us to make the turn back east to Diamond Lake."

"Aw, sweet as, mate!" Esther exclaimed, squeezing my hand again. She grinned happily at Aria. "That's totally sweet, eh?"

"Yeah, totally," Aria said, giving Esther a friendly grin.

I breathed a sigh of relief to have that little conversation over and done with. I was relieved when Aria smiled across at me too.

"Thanks, Leo, this means a lot to us," she said.

"Sure thing, Bear Bait," I replied. "I'd do just about anything for you; you know that."

I felt a rush of relief as Aria and I seemed to clear the air. At that moment, we'd both come to a sudden realization. I wasn't able to clearly define it, but I knew that Aria and I would talk it out sometime in the future because that's what good friends do.

"Come on, lovebirds," Aria said. "Let's go jump in a lake!"

Aria sprang up and kicked the door open. She screamed at the top of her lungs as she raced down the dock and leaped into the lake. Esther and I bailed out of the sauna right behind her. We couldn't help but shout and scream too as we lunged out into the cool clear water while the boys watched us from the dock.

“It doesn’t get much better than this,” I thought. “It couldn’t possibly get any better, could it?”

Quincy gave me a wink and a nod from his perch on the edge of the dock. I could tell he was jealous. There I was, hanging out with two amazing women, swimming and splashing around in a beautiful lake, living it up all summer long, while he was getting ready to go back home. I would miss his spunky little persona and how he always seemed to find a way to keep me on my toes. Thankfully, I still had Aria around to challenge my preconceptions.

I hopped out and let the girls keep swimming in the lake. I had to get the boys out of there anyway. They were too distracted by Aria and Esther to do much of anything except stare. I led the little sailors up the long dock and down the trail back to base camp. They didn’t stink anymore, but they still jostled for position in the line as we hiked along. No fifth or sixth-grade boy likes to be last in line, ever.

At the campfire program that evening, the boys and I stood proudly up in front of everyone. We told our stories of fighting off the bear, of discovering the hidden stash of candy bars in the woods, and cliff jumping on Diamond Lake. We stretched it a bit, of course. The audience at the campfire probably wasn’t sure if they could believe us or not, but you could tell it was all true, just by looking into the bright but sleepy eyes of those eight wonderful boys.

There was so much that happened on that trip. We could have talked for hours about all the fun things we did, like learning to make home-made pizza over the fire, swimming around and playing water tag in Knife Lake, smoking out our clothes to fend off mosquitoes, playing a game called “Wolf” in the woods, singing silly songs in the rain, thumb wrestling in the canoes, and getting chased down the portage trails by some crazy canoe guide with a big canoe on his back. We did a lot of quiet things too, like calling to the loons, enjoying the beauty of nature, listening to stories around the campfire, having deep conversations about friends and family, and talking about becoming young men of character and integrity.

There were many more things we could have shared about that trip, but it’s too long of a story to tell. Someday, maybe I’ll explain the whole

thing, including what happened on the portage into Pickle Lake, the games we played in the thunderstorm on Jasper, and the bathing beauty we passed by in the waters of Ogishkemuncie. But that isn't what this story is about, so it'll have to wait until another time.

After the campfire, the boys and I went straight to our cabin. There was no wrestling match to get them to sleep. We were all so tired; we slept like logs. I'm sure our dreams were full of amazing sunsets, refreshing waterfalls, hungry bears, lonely loon calls, warm sandy beaches, and beautiful women. At least that's what I was dreaming about as I drifted off to sleep that night.

In the morning, I was refreshed and ready to go again. The boys were heading out first thing, so I got them up early and marched them down to the dock to see them off. I would miss Quincy and the rest of the boys I had become so attached to in our short time together. It had been a great trip, and I knew those boys would remember it for the rest of their lives.

It truly had been the trip of a lifetime!