

chapter 28

into the north woods

"We're going tramping in the wop-wops!"

As I was hiking up the trail to Starlight, I finally ran into Esther and Aria. I felt the urge to give each of them a hug, but at the last second, I just smiled and decided to play it cool.

"Hey, Leo!" Aria exclaimed. "Where've you been? We've been looking all over the place for you."

"I was seeing my group off," I said. "We were a little behind schedule. So, what's up? Are we still on or not?"

"Yeah, buddy!" she said excitedly. "We're all set. Esther and I got everything packed and ready to go."

"When do you want to take off?" I asked.

"Two hours ago!" Aria shouted, giving me a big shove in the chest. Esther laughed as Aria jumped around and shouted, "Come on, Leo! We've been waiting all week for you to get back. Let's dip this place and scoot on out of here!"

"You mean, right now?" I asked.

"Yeah!" Aria said, giving me another shove. "Are you ready for this?" She turned to Esther and yelled, "Are you guys ready for this?"

"All right!" I replied. "Give me ten minutes. I need to grab some stuff at my cabin first. Then I'll meet you down at the beach."

"Okay, that's what I'm talking about!" Aria shouted. "We'll see you there in five!"

She and Esther took off running down the path, leaving me standing there. Aria suddenly stopped, turned around, and yelled back, "Come on, Leo! Get a move on!"

As the girls disappeared into the woods, I could hear them chattering excitedly on their way to the beach. I made my way down the same trail behind them. Then I cut left on a little path that led the back way to my cabin. I grabbed my sleeping bag and filled a small plastic bag with some extra clothes, a swimsuit, rain poncho, flashlight, my journal, and a map. That was enough for a three-day marathon out on the lakes.

When I got to the beach, the girls were standing there waiting for me. Aria was chomping at the bit. Actually, it was a big piece of beef jerky, and she looked like she wanted to deck me.

“It’s about time, Farm Boy!” she cried frantically. “We’ve been waiting here for like an hour!”

“Oh, chill out, cuz,” Esther said as she grinned at her friend and then at me. “We’re pretty stoked about the trip, Leo. We’ve just been waiting all day long for you to get back.”

“All week long!” Aria corrected her.

“Yeah, bro!” Esther exclaimed. “We’re just a wee bit excited, eh?”

“Well, I’m ready to go,” I replied. “Just stay away from me, Hunter. I don’t want another bloody nose.”

“No problem, Farm Boy!” she said. “Come on, let’s go.”

“Where’s all our stuff?” I asked, looking around the beach for the packs and the canoe.

“It’s over at eagle landing by the cathedral,” Aria said. “Come on! Let’s get a move on!”

“Why is it over there?” I asked.

But Aria had already taken off. She sprinted ahead, as Esther and I followed behind and tried to keep up. By the time we got to the bridge, she was already halfway across. We ran across the bridge, which creaked and bounced up and down as we chased after Aria. When we got to the other side, she was bounding down the trail to eagle landing, which was a smaller, more remote, rocky beach with a big square dock where a pontoon boat was tied up. The canoe was there as well, resting halfway in the water, already loaded and ready to go.

“Throw your stuff in, Leo, and let’s shove off,” Aria said almost frantically. “It’s getting late already.”

We pushed the canoe out into the water and jumped in. Aria took the bow and let me have the stern. Esther nestled down in the middle compartment with the packs and my guitar, which I had almost forgotten at my cabin. We paddled around the eastern edge of the island, staying close to the shore for a while. We could hear the voices and laughter of everyone up in Starlight Lodge as we quietly slipped away. The voices slowly faded off behind us as we rounded a rocky point on the east side of the island. I turned the canoe out into the lake and aimed it straight across toward a low spot in the tree line on the eastern shore.

Aria was a strong paddler. The canoe lunged forward each time she took a stroke in the water. I struggled to keep pace with her, but gradually got in sync, taking a break every once in a while to just lie back and use my paddle as a rudder. Esther leaned back on the packs in the middle of the canoe. She looked around excitedly at the ripples in the water and the scenery that was constantly changing as we skimmed across the lake.

The sun was already hanging low in the west as I aimed the canoe across the lake toward a small gap in the shoreline. We cruised through a bit of rapids in the passageway, then on into a narrow channel that led due east to a boat landing and a public campground at the end of the Gunflint Trail. We could see the road and the boat access down by the lake in the distance, but that was as close as we would get to civilization for the next three days.

I swung the canoe to the left, following the sound of some gentle rapids that connected Diamond Lake and Gull Lake to the north. We paddled into a calm area above the rapids and cruised ahead slowly into a small opening along the shoreline. It was an overgrown portage marked by a few wooden planks near the edge of the water. Most people crossed over to Gull Lake via the boat landing, but I wanted to avoid the people and the parking lot over there. Either way, we'd have to carry our packs and canoe across to the next lake, and the portage was a little shorter of a hike.

Just before the canoe scraped on the rocks, Aria jumped out into the shallow water and grabbed the side of the boat to guide it in.

“All right, you guys, let’s do this!” she said excitedly. “We’ve got a long way to go before we rest tonight.”

Esther climbed forward, clutching the side rails of the canoe. Then she stepped gingerly into the water. I moved the canoe a bit closer to shore and then stepped out into the water too.

“This is so unreal!” Esther said excitedly. “We’re going tramping in the wop-wops, you guys!”

“This ain’t nothing like the prairie I used to play in as a kid,” Aria said as she lifted a pack out of the canoe. “Man, this is heavy, Esther! What did you pack in there? You’re entire wardrobe?”

“Nah, just a few things for the bush,” Esther replied. “My togs and a towel, a jumper, an extra jersey, some bug spray, my jammies, my jandals, an extra pair of knickers of course, plus some biscuits, a bag of scroggin, and a torch.”

“What the?” Aria said, shaking her head in disbelief.

“You’ll see!” Esther said with a confident smile. “I reckon it’ll all come in handy when we get out there.”

“All right, girlfriend, whatever!” Aria replied as she lifted the pack up high for Esther to carry.

“Crikey!” Esther exclaimed as she slipped into the shoulder pads. “This thing *is* heavy!”

I jammed the two paddles under the front thwart of the canoe. Then I grabbed the other pack and carried it to shore. I lifted the pack up behind Aria as she pushed her arms through the shoulder straps and bounced it up high onto her back.

“Come on, Esther! Follow me!” Aria called as she hunched forward and lunged up the trail into the woods. Esther slowly turned and followed along behind, lugging her own heavy pack.

“See you on the other side, Farm Boy!” Aria called back to me.

“What about the waka?” Esther asked.

“Don’t worry about that. Leo’s got it.” Aria replied.

I turned back to the canoe, still floating in the water. “Okay, here we go,” I whispered to myself. “I can do this.”

This was the tough part about traveling by canoe in the Boundary Waters: getting your canoe from one lake to the next. Most of the

portages were laden with rocks and roots, swampy puddles of mud and muck, and sometimes whole logs or downed trees across the trail. All along the way, leafy green branches reached out into the narrow sliver of daylight that fell onto the path.

Portaging a canoe was always a challenge, but as the summer progressed, I was growing to appreciate it for what it was: lifting the canoe out of the water, swinging it overhead, and letting the shoulder pads drop down slowly around my neck; feeling the weight of the canoe, and balancing it as I stepped left, then right, trying not to fall over; then lunging forward step by step up the trail, carefully navigating the twists and turns along the way.

With that being said, portaging a canoe was also probably my least favorite activity as a guide. The view from underneath was somewhat limiting and often downright dangerous, with the forest floor passing by below. Almost always, a pesky mosquito was buzzing around my face as I moved ahead, unable to do much of anything except keep going forward. There was really no way to stop. Doing that would just prolong the pain that was steadily building in my shoulders. So, I would simply keep trudging along with my arms outstretched underneath the canoe, gripping the side rails with my fingers, and pulling down on them to keep it level. By the end, my shoulders would be burning like fire. The experience was something that was seared into both my mind and my body. The aching, sore muscles served as a reminder long after a trip was over.

Yet, it was something I learned to value and appreciate about being up there on the lakes. I enjoyed everything about it: the challenge of trekking off into the wilderness, traveling from lake to lake through narrow portages that led to remote places farther and farther away from civilization—away from people and traffic, away from assignments and classes and appointments to keep, away from the hustle and bustle of the world and everything that came with it.

Thankfully, our first portage was a short one that just skirted around the rapids and came out below them. When I got to the other side, I waded straight out into the water until it was about knee-deep. Then I pushed the canoe up quickly and threw it off my shoulders to

the right, letting it flip over and fall back into the water with a loud satisfying smack.

“There you go!” I said, happy to have the first portage behind us. “Let’s load ‘er back up and keep going.”

The girls dropped the packs back in as I pulled out the paddles and steadied the canoe. It took a lot of teamwork to do a portage right. It was hard work, but it built character. You can tell a lot about a person when you’re faced with a tough portage. Our first one was only about fifteen rods long. There would be longer and tougher portages ahead, and I was wondering how Esther would handle them.

Once we were back in the canoe, we moved north again. We paddled around a point, then kept going through a channel with enormous black rocks sticking up out of the water and others visible below the surface. We had to be careful not to scrape the bottom of the canoe. Aria leaned forward and directed me to steer right or left to avoid running aground. The channel opened up into a small lake with an island in the middle. We paddled across the open water, skirting the island on our left, and continued north into another narrow channel that was just outside the Boundary Waters.

There were private cabins tucked away in the trees on both sides. Several had docks and boat ramps leading down to the water. We passed a couple of other canoe outfitters along the way as well, but we saw no one out and about at that late hour.

The channel became even narrower as we passed a rocky outcropping with a weathered sign posted there, welcoming visitors to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. We made our way through another narrow passageway where more rocks were hiding just below the surface. Eventually, it opened up into a wide channel that continued north as far as the eye could see.

We quietly paddled ahead in silence, taking in the beauty all around. The channel widened out considerably, and we eventually found ourselves paddling into the southeastern section of Lake Saganaga, the “lake of many islands” as the Chippewa so appropriately described it long ago. It extended for several miles northwest up into Canada, deep into the Quetico Provincial Park that bordered the Boundary Waters

to the north. We could see islands up ahead in a bigger part of the lake and more islands off to the west as well. It was unusually calm and quiet on the water, with barely a hint of a breeze. It was a welcome treat on such a large lake.

When we passed a small island on our left, the enormous lake opened up for miles and miles to the west. The tiny ripples on the surface of the water reflected the glistening rays of pure white sunlight that shot directly into our eyes. Esther flipped down her sunglasses and smiled back at me. It was such an amazing sight. I had to squint and look away to keep from being blinded.

As the sun began to set in the west, it dipped behind a line of tall white pines on an island far away, casting long shadows that stretched eastward for miles across the lake toward our canoe. The islands in the west slowly fell into darkness, but the treetops still glowed in the last remaining sunlight. Behind us, the trees on the eastern shoreline had turned a deep forest green, and the water reflected their waning glory in the last few seconds before the sunset.

We stopped paddling and watched in silence as the sun slowly dropped down onto the horizon. Esther grabbed her camera and snapped a couple of photos. For the last few seconds, we could actually see the sun moving ever so slowly . . . down, down, down behind the trees in the faraway distance, and then it was gone.

“That was sweet,” Aria said quietly.

“Faaaaaa!” Esther exclaimed softly. “That was a stunning one.”

“Totally,” Aria replied.

“Thanks, nature! You are ace!” Esther exclaimed.

“Just wait, it’s not over yet,” I quietly said.

The sky grew more colorful as the sun sank beneath the horizon. The vibrant shades kept transforming from soft blues high above to deep orange and yellow in the west. Golden cloud formations glowed brightly in the sky far away. Above us, rosy pink whiffs of watery mist drifted eastward in the upper atmosphere, still reflecting the direct light from the distant sun. The circumference of the evening sky in every direction—north, south, east, and west—gradually faded to a dusty blue with shades of purple off to the northeast.

We watched for a little while longer. Then I dipped my paddle into the water and moved us forward again, aiming the canoe at an opening between two large islands far away in the distance. When Esther asked to switch with me, I was happy to oblige. We carefully swapped places as Aria steadied the canoe. Esther started paddling right away, happy to have something to do, but as the canoe curved sharply off to the left, I heard Esther curse under her breath.

“This paddle isn’t working right,” she complained as she tried to keep the canoe going straight ahead.

“Switch sides!” Aria called from the front as we floated dangerously close to some submerged rocks.

“This is hard!” Esther cried as she flipped her paddle across to the opposite side and splashed water all over my back.

“Come on girlfriend!” Aria called again. “Go right!”

Esther paddled frantically, flipping her paddle back and forth from one side to the other, getting me soaked in the process. I didn’t mind, but my guitar was getting wet too. When I spun around and peeked at Esther, she threw me a frustrated look and tugged on the paddle again. I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing out loud.

I tried to explain how to do a J-stroke with the paddle to keep us going straight. At first, she struggled with the technique. The canoe curved aimlessly off to the right and then back left as it made large sweeping arcs in the water. Esther didn’t give up, though. Eventually, she calmed down and had us moving forward again.

As we continued northwest, we passed by several more islands of different shapes and sizes, scattered across the southern section of the lake. When we paddled through the opening between the two large islands, suddenly, we saw how enormous Lake Saganaga actually was. Far away to the north, across miles of open water, we could just barely see the Canadian shoreline in the growing darkness. The wind had completely died down. The lake fell silent and still as it reflected the last remaining light in the evening sky.

It was exactly what we’d been hoping for all along.