

PROLOGUE

Randy really didn't want to wait.

The line for gas at the Costco was longer than he liked, and he was already behind schedule.

He was supposed to be back at the camp by 2:00 p.m. But his special order of twenty-five chickens had been delayed, and it was already one thirty. If he stopped for gas, he'd be an hour late and that wasn't ideal, especially with three giant coolers' worth of chickens in the back of his SUV in the middle of the summer.

On the other hand, he was down to a third of a tank of gas. If he didn't fill up, he'd be close to empty by the time he got to the camp, and considering that there were no gas stations within twenty miles of the place, that seemed like a bad idea.

The decision was made for him when three cars pulled out of one line in quick succession. He immediately slid into the open spot and told himself that this was a sign that his luck was changing.

As he waited to move forward, he glanced at himself in the rearview mirror. His shaggy brown hair was getting long. It was on the verge of moving past hipster cool into plain old sloppy, which wouldn't go over with the gal he was hoping to win over.

He knew it was a long shot, but he was still hoping that Marta, the counselor for the oldest girls' bunk, might be willing to trip the light fantastic tonight. Yes, the big dance was mostly for the kids, and

as the camp handyman, he wasn't even officially invited to attend, but the session was almost over and he hoped the rules might be loosened enough for him to impress her with some of his moves.

His little daydream faded when another car pulled out and he was rewarded with an available tank. He pulled into the spot, hopped out, and used the camp credit card to pay. He knew from experience that filling the tank was a good five-minute process, so he pulled out his earbuds, clicked on a song on his phone, and worked on his dance moves in the narrow space between the tank and the vehicle.

The woman at the tank in front of him gave him a disapproving stare, but he didn't care. There was a reason people called him Rowdy Randy, and it had a lot to do with his carefree, devil-may-care attitude. He wasn't going to let some uptight suburban chick ruin his vibe.

Randy closed his eyes and let the beat take over. In the background of the song, he thought he could almost hear people cheering for him. That was a good omen. After a few seconds, he opened his eyes and noted that the tense lady was no longer looking at him nastily. In fact, she was nowhere to be seen. He found that a little odd, since she'd left her driver's side door open.

Movement off to the left caught his attention. What he saw was befuddling. The woman from the car was running up the small hill away from the gas tanks. She glanced back briefly, and he was startled to see a look of panic on her face before she turned away again.

He turned off the song. Surprisingly, the cheering he'd heard in the background continued. Then it occurred to him that it sounded less like cheering than . . . screaming.

He turned back in the direction of the sound. What he saw in front of him made him blink multiple times. It didn't make any sense. Rather than try to comprehend it, he did the only thing that he could think of.

Leaping across the driver's seat of the SUV, he opened the glove compartment and pulled out the small pistol that he kept for emergencies but had never actually used. He took off the safety as he stood back up and turned to face whatever that thing was.

It was much closer now, and now Randy noticed that it wasn't only one. As people streamed past him, running away from the store and toward the road, he held his ground. Lifting the gun, he aimed as best he could, despite his shaking hands. Then he fired.

He landed a direct hit, but it didn't seem to make any difference. The thing kept coming, and then, before he even understood what was happening, it was on him.

CHAPTER 1

Lukas tried to quiet his palpitating heart.

He wiped his sweaty palms on his shirt and reminded himself to breathe. His stomach was one giant twisted knot, and his fingertips tingled slightly.

Everything told him that what he was about to do was a huge mistake, one that could ruin relationships and leave him a quivering mess.

But he'd been after this for weeks, and he was running out of time. After tonight, there would only be Sunday and Monday left; the buses would arrive early on Tuesday morning to take everyone back to their respective cities.

If he was ever going to take this chance, now was the time.

Steve Sailor, the bushy-mustached sleep-away summer camp director, stood on a bench and gave the brief obligatory warning about behaving responsibly. Then the music started up again, and the bravest kids swarmed across the tennis courts to match up with their intended targets.

Lukas decided to throw caution to the wind and started walking across the court, his gaze fixed on Juliana Goldenson. She was dressed for the end-of-session 80s' dance party as tennis star Gabriela Sabatini.

Admittedly it wasn't the most creative costume ever. Juliana was wearing a tucked-in crewneck Hollow Valley camp t-shirt and a tennis skirt. But to Lukas, it seemed like an inspired choice, setting off her long dark hair and showcasing her tanned arms and the muscular legs that had led her to victory as a mere junior at the state cross-country championship last spring.

Juliana, or Jules as she was known to everyone, felt someone's eyes on her. She glanced up, made eye contact with Lukas, and gave him her patented half smile. He started walking, brimming with unearned confidence.

He was halfway toward her, his prop eyeglasses and fishing cap both in danger of falling off, when someone grabbed him by the arm with a vise-like grip. He almost fell as he tried to maintain his balance. Looking up, he saw it was Aubrey West, one of the girls from the Lumens, the oldest girls' bunk.

She was wearing a full-length hot pink leotard and had a massive bow in her hair, which she'd curled into endless ringlets. She sported earrings that dangled down to her shoulders. Short and sinewy strong with cocoa skin and blazing brown eyes, she looked like she was about to deck him.

"Want to make a quick five bucks, Lincoln?" she asked. For some reason, she always called him by his last name. Lukas assumed it had something to do with her dad being a colonel in the military.

"What?" he asked, still not sure if she was angry at him for some unintended slight.

"Emily Satterfield offered me twenty dollars if I could get you to dance with me before you humiliated yourself by asking Jules. I agreed. If you go for it, I'll cut you in for 25 percent. Easy money for you—one dance, five bucks, no crushing rejection at the hands of an older woman."

“How did you know I was going—” Lukas began to ask, feeling his face start to flush.

“Everyone knows, dude,” she said, cutting him off. “You’re like a little lost puppy. It’s embarrassing.”

He pushed right past the substance of her comment, unwilling to process the consequences of “everyone knowing” at this moment, and focused instead on her tone. “This is how you ask me to dance—by insulting me?”

“I’m trying to help you, man,” she insisted. “You’ll come off less hopeless if you wait at least a few songs before hitting on my counselor, who also happens to be two years older than you and, in case your forgot, your brother’s girlfriend.”

Lukas set aside the unspoken judgment in her voice. He’d beaten himself up enough over his feelings lately. He wasn’t going to do it tonight too.

Still, he had to admit Aubrey was probably right. He might be better off waiting a bit to ask Jules. It was less obvious, although apparently everything he’d been doing all summer was obvious to just about everyone.

“One song,” he said reluctantly. “Five dollars?”

Aubrey nodded.

“We have a deal,” Lukas said.

He began swinging his torso to a-ha in what he hoped was a rhythmic manner.

“Not this song,” Aubrey said, aghast. “It has to be a slow one.”

“You never said that!” Lukas objected.

“You think Emily would give me twenty dollars to bounce around for three minutes? That’s no dare. It has to be a legit ‘arms around the waist, swaying slowly’ song.”

“Then I get half?”

“Half what?” Aubrey asked, though she clearly knew what he meant.

Still, he spelled it out for her. “I get ten bucks. You’re taking up two precious songs and one of them is a slow dance.”

“That hardly seems fair,” she said unconvincingly.

“Take it or leave it. You can make ten dollars or lose twenty. It’s up to you, West.” He smiled, proud of his snarky quip.

The song changed, and “Take On Me” was replaced by Madonna’s “Crazy for You.”

“I’ll take it,” Aubrey said, her eyebrows raised, as if challenging him.

Refusing to back down, he wrapped his arms around her waist and began rocking from side to side. Slightly surprised, Aubrey took a second before joining in the motion. It continued like that for another minute or so, the two of them moving robotically back and forth, barely making eye contact.

“Who are you supposed to be, anyway?” he finally asked.

“You’re kidding, right?” she asked, astounded.

He shook his head.

“I’m Whitney Houston, dumbass! Who the hell did you think I was?”

Lukas shrugged.

“I should ask you the same question,” she said indignantly.

He opened his mouth to reply but she cut him off. “I was being sarcastic, Lincoln. I know who you are. You’re Lucas from the movie *Lucas*. A little on the nose, don’t you think?”

“I love that movie.”

“Of course you do,” she said, shaking her head pityingly, “because it’s older, just like Jules.”

The song ended, and the two of them quickly separated.

“Emily will give me the money when we get all our stuff back on Tuesday morning,” she said brusquely. “We’ll settle up then.”

“You’re lucky I don’t charge interest,” Lukas said.

“You’re lucky I don’t kick your ass,” she retorted, turning on her heel before he could reply.

It took him a second to regroup from the indignity. Shaking it off, he glanced in the direction where Jules had been earlier. As the first strains of Cyndi Lauper singing “When You Were Mine” came over the speakers, he saw her.

She was still in the same spot, but now her arms were locked around Caleb’s neck as she stared up into his eyes. As everyone near them hopped around, she and his older brother stood in place, barely moving, oblivious to everything around them.

Lukas, sensing the eyes of the entire camp on him, decided now would be a good time to get some fruit punch.

CHAPTER 2

For a while the next morning, Lukas pretended not to be bothered by what Aubrey had said. But it was short-lived. At breakfast, over dried Froot Loops, he kept his head down, refusing to make eye contact with anyone.

“We don’t get powdered eggs this morning?” Stephen, who was sitting next to him in the dining hall, asked incredulously. “Not even milk for the cereal?”

Caleb, who was not just Lukas’s older brother but his counselor too, responded. “Rowdy Randy still hasn’t come back from his grocery run to San Antonio yesterday, and no one can get a hold of him,” he said from the head of the table. “Steve is actually really worried about him. So please don’t make it worse by complaining. He sent Lloyd to Kerrville for an emergency supply run this morning. He should be back in the next hour or so.”

“Maybe Randy ran off the road or something. It wouldn’t be the first time,” Lonnie said, concerned. “Did Steve call the cops?”

“He did,” Caleb said. “But they’ve got their hands full with some rioting in San Antonio, and Rowdy Randy isn’t at the top of their priority list right now.”

“Rioting?” Trevor asked. “What’s that about?”

“That’s not anything you boys need to be worrying about,” Todd said, going into parental mode.

Todd Kemp, the senior counselor of the oldest boys' bunk, the Toros, was a smallish guy with curly light blond hair. He was headed into his final year at Southern Methodist University in Dallas where he was majoring in child development. He wanted to be a school guidance counselor, so this was the perfect summer gig for him.

Lukas didn't mind Todd even though the guy consistently forgot that he was dealing mostly with fifteen-year-olds and not pre-teens. He was constantly "checking in" to see how each of them was doing. But his heart seemed to be in the right place. Still, Lukas wasn't in the mood this morning. He tuned him out and returned his attention to his Froot Loops.

Javi nudged him and gave him a questioning look.

"What is it?" Lukas asked, mildly annoyed.

"You're not very chatty this morning. And you barely said a word last night after that dance with Aubrey. Did she steal your breath away? Your heart maybe?"

Lukas didn't take offense at the teasing dig. Javier Mendez was his best friend at camp. And though he was half a head shorter than Lukas, he made up for his lack of height with his out-sized personality and personal style. His long brown hair was swept to the side like the girl from that 1990s show *Friends*. While he'd never asked, Lukas was pretty sure that was by design.

Lukas put his spoon down and leaned over.

"Is it totally obvious to everyone at camp that I'm into Jules?" he whispered.

Javi looked at him with a mix of reticence and sympathy. "Not *everyone*," he said slowly.

"Like who?" Lukas demanded.

"The Dandelions don't know."

“The only people at camp who are unaware of my feelings are the seven-year-old girls’ bunk?” Lukas hissed.

“To be honest, man,” Javi said, trying not to laugh, “some of them might know, too.”

“What about *him*?” Lukas asked, not smiling as he nodded imperceptibly in his brother’s direction.

“Yeah, Lukas, “Javi said quietly, “I’m pretty sure Caleb knows. He’s a smart guy, and you’re not exactly Mr. Subtlety. But I wouldn’t sweat it. I don’t think he cares that much.”

“Why not?”

“For one thing, I doubt he can blame you. Jules is hot. He probably thinks you have good taste.”

“And the other thing?”

“What?” Javi asked confused.

“You said ‘for one thing.’ That implies a second thing.”

“Oh yeah. Well, the second thing is, Lukas, your brother is pretty damn hot, too. I mean, like go-down-to-the-creek-at-free-swim-just-to-watch-him-in-his-trunks hot.”

“Okay, Javi, I get it. You’ve told me about your crush on my brother many times. What’s your point?”

“My point is,” Javi replied, enjoying watching his friend squirm, “I think he mostly doesn’t care because she’s with *him*. So it doesn’t really matter how many longing looks you send her way, you know?”

Lukas nodded. He did know.

Caleb Lincoln didn’t have to sweat much these days. He was headed off to Brown University after the summer. He could have stayed closer to home and gone to either Pepperdine or Loyola Marymount, both in Southern California, both of which had offered him full basketball scholarships.

Caleb had the same brown hair as Lukas, but at six foot three and two hundred pounds, he was a full five inches taller and fifty pounds heavier than his little brother. He was also a beast on the court. But instead of accepting an offer from one of those schools, he'd chosen an Ivy League university on the complete other side of the country that didn't even give out athletic scholarships.

Lukas tried not to take the decision personally. He knew Caleb was trying to escape their parents, especially their mom, who treated his extracurricular activities like a second religion, who never missed a game or anything else he ever did.

But deep down, Lukas also knew there was another reason Caleb wanted to move far away, one that had scarred their family for a decade, one neither of them would ever acknowledge out loud. Lukas pushed his Froot Loops away. He wasn't hungry anymore.