

the
Thrashers
a novel

Julie Soto



WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

First published in the United States by Wednesday Books, an imprint of St. Martin's Publishing Group

THE THRASHERS. Copyright © 2025 by Julia Soto. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. For information, address St. Martin's Publishing Group, 120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271.

www.wednesdaybooks.com

Designed by Jen Edwards

All emojis designed by OpenMoji—the open-source emoji and icon project. License: CC BY-SA 4.0

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Soto, Julie, author.

Title: The Thrashers / Julie Soto.

Description: First edition. | New York : Wednesday Books, 2025. |

Audience term: Teenagers | Audience: Ages 12-18.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024043488 | ISBN 9781250377173

(hardcover) | ISBN 9781250377180 (ebook)

Subjects: CYAC: Cliques—Fiction. | Friendship—Fiction. |

Death—Fiction. | Mystery and detective stories. | LCGFT:

Detective and mystery fiction. | Thrillers (Fiction) | Novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.S6825 Th 2025 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024043488>

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at 1-800-221-7945, extension 5442, or by email at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

First Edition: 2025

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Prologue



The night I died was supposed to be my prom night.

It was supposed to be a night of satin and lace, limos and hotel rooms, stolen kisses and cherished mistakes. While my classmates laughed and danced and snapped pictures, I climbed into my bathtub in my exquisite pink dress and emptied my mother's Vicodin bottle down my throat.

I slipped away with the hum of a slow dance in my veins.

Sacramento police ruled it a suicide, but my mother screamed and my father cried—*Emily would never. Ask anyone who really knew her.*

So they did ask. Teen after teen, prom king and queen, future business leaders of America and future drug dealers of Modesto—*Oh, it was absolutely a suicide.*

But one phrase slipped into multiple interviews. Two words I whispered against their ears, until they were as quick on their tongues as *followers, filters, and finals.*

The Thrashers.

Chapter One



JULY

If it were up to Jodi, she'd be in bed at eleven on a Friday night, watching Netflix and pretending the Ben & Jerry's carton was a single serving, but that was rarely how she got to spend her weekends. Caroline Vallow was having a party. Jodi didn't even know Caroline Vallow, but if she missed tonight, she'd spend the next six months hearing stories from this party—like how Paige had made out with a foreign exchange student, or how Lucy and Julian had won beer pong with a behind-the-back shot, or how Zack had met his new summer fling.

So, she'd slithered into her tightest jeans, tucked her house key into her bra, and after ten unsuccessful tries calling Zack for a ride, she hopped the bus to this St. Joseph's High party.

Because if she wasn't there, she wouldn't exist.

The bus rattled to a stop, and Jodi jumped out, following the bass beat of bad music to a cul-de-sac of cookie-cutter two-story houses with tidy yards and a Mercedes in each driveway. Jodi had lived on a cul-de-sac when she was a baby, but only knew it from pictures her dad would show her of her mom.

Double-parked cars overflowed from the sidewalks, and boys set

off Fourth of July firecrackers while girls watched from lawn chairs, even though July was almost over. Jodi smoothed down her shirt and leaned into the side-view mirror of a parked car to check her reflection. She tucked an auburn curl behind her ear before realizing the car was *swaying*, the windows fogged with the activity of whatever was going on inside. She jumped back, apologized to no one, and scurried away.

Jodi squeezed into the house, and dozens of eyes turned to the door, expecting to see someone they knew. She tried to smile as they inspected her, knowing this was the price to pay for crashing another high school's party. But then again, it was highly possible this would be the reaction at her own high school as well.

It wasn't that she didn't have any friends. It was that she was sometimes invisible next to them. Jodi's friends were never overlooked in a room.

"Jodi Dillon! Get over here!" said a bubbly voice. A girl with expertly styled honey-blond hair, Crest-white teeth, and long legs disappearing under a short dress stood in the middle of the living room, surrounded by people dancing to the music.

Paige Montgomery, for instance, was someone who turned heads wherever she went, eyes glued to her until she had fully left a room.

Jodi waved at her a bit sheepishly and pointed toward the kitchen, miming that she was going to find water.

Paige opened her mouth to yell something back at her, but then the music changed and Paige screamed, throwing her hands up in the air.

Laughing, Jodi set off through a sea of red cups. There was karaoke happening in the back of the house—*bad* karaoke. When the kitchen materialized, she headed straight for a metal tub on the kitchen island in search of water bottles, but a tall dude cut in front of her just as Jodi reached out.

"Sorry," he said with a grin. "Beer?"

"No, I don't drink, actually—"

“Were you in Freeman’s algebra with me this year?” He grabbed a Bud Light, knocked the cap off against the granite countertop, and pushed it into her hand. “I’m Matt.”

Her fingers curled around the cold bottle. She opened her mouth to tell him she didn’t even go to his school, but Matt kept talking.

“What colleges are you looking at?” Then, without pausing for a response—“I’m applying to Santa Barbara and San Diego. Love that beach life, am I right?”

“Totally.” Her vowels dripped.

“Matt, get me the Brita,” said a girl appearing behind Jodi. She had on a bikini and nothing else. Her eyes scanned Jodi up and down, and her lips curved downward.

“Sure thing.” Matt jumped to it, taking the pitcher from the fridge and filling a red cup for the girl. “Hey, did you hear Zack Thrasher’s here?” Matt said to them both.

The girl’s eyes snapped to Matt and grew wide. “Really? When I’m breaking out?” She dipped her head to stare at her pores in the toaster’s reflection.

Jodi bit back a grin as she grabbed a red cup and took the Brita from Matt. “Who’s Zack Thrasher?” she asked, feigning curiosity.

The girl gaped at her. “You’re joking, right?”

Jodi turned innocent eyes on her and shook her head. This ought to be good.

“He’s New Helvetia’s point guard,” Matt said excitedly. “I heard he got the hat at Taylor Swift’s Santa Clara concert. He was in VIP with Gigi Hadid.”

“Did you hear that he discovered some old band named KISS and the whole school showed up to spring fling with their faces painted?” the girl asked.

Jodi snorted. *She* had “discovered” KISS and shared them with Zack, but yes, the face paint thing was real.

She was just about to head off in search of the boy in question when she heard something terrible happening in the next room.

The karaoke speakers blared a familiar voice. “Wanna dedicate this song to Jodi Dillon. ‘Hey Ya!’ is her favorite song of all time.”

She peered around the kitchen corner and glared at the handsome boy with the microphone, grinning at her.

“For you, Jodi,” Zack Thrasher said. And then she had to sit through her best friend drunk-singing her most hated song.

He danced his way to her, drawing a crowd, and at least she got the pleasure of watching the bikini girl’s eyes nearly pop out of her head as Zack Thrasher’s attention rested solely on Jodi.

If she had to guess, he was at least four beers in. Zack was a playful and unpredictable drunk, jumping off roofs into pools, firing up a stranger’s barbecue for a girl who wanted a cheeseburger, or even just spending hours dancing to the worst music in the world.

At the bridge to “Hey Ya!,” Matt was the loudest person to yell “ice cold!” and when Zack asked for the “ladies,” he shoved the mic into Jodi’s face. She responded drily, “Yeah?”

Zack buckled over laughing and passed the microphone off to someone else. He swept Jodi into a hug that pulled her off her feet.

“Where’ve you been?” Zack put her down, pushing his sandy brown hair out of his eyes and smiling down at her with his perfectly straight teeth in that way that made her stomach flutter. “I thought you weren’t gonna make it.”

“I was texting you about a ride,” she said.

“Shit! My phone’s dead already.” Then he suddenly said, “Text Julian!” As if she still needed a ride.

Jodi pressed her lips together in a tight smile. “I did. No response.” Her gaze slid pointedly to the tall, dark-haired print ad model who had joined Zack in the kitchen.

Julian Hollister sipped from his red cup with a calculated gaze. “Hm. Bad reception, I guess.”

Jodi narrowed her eyes at him, but before she could respond, Matt was stumbling forward. “You’re Zack, right?”

“Yeah! Good to meet you.” Zack stuck his hand out. He was one

of the only people she knew who shook hands—something his dad had instilled in him.

“I’m Monica,” bikini girl said with a flirtatious smile. She leaned down on the kitchen island, pressing her boobs together, and just like that—Zack and Julian’s attention was firmly away from Jodi. “What brings you to a St. Joseph’s party?” Monica asked.

Jodi rolled her eyes and turned to the sink, deciding to fill the Brita before putting it back. She’d just placed the jug in the fridge when a shadow fell over her shoulder. Without looking up, she knew Julian was gearing up to ruin her night.

“Too good for tap water, Dillon?”

She glowered up all six-foot-two of him. “Like you’ve ever had tap water in your life.”

Julian Hollister was the bane of her existence, to put it politely. Jodi had been friends with Zack Thrasher since second grade—best friends, she even dared to say. But when Zack started focusing on basketball in middle school, he’d met Julian, and they’d been inseparable ever since—no matter how hard Jodi tried to wedge them apart.

Julian’s family had money, like Zack’s. They played the same sports, took the same classes, liked the same kind of humor. But Julian was rough around the edges. He cheated on tests, he cheated on girls, and he didn’t apologize for anything. He was disgustingly attractive, Jodi knew, and aside from his dark hair and water-polo shoulders, he and Zack were evenly matched on looks. She was just happy that his sketchy choices and complete disregard for other people’s comfort hadn’t rubbed off on Zack.

“It’s warm in here.” Zack hooked his thumb toward the sliding glass door. “Should we head outside?”

Matt and Monica were only too happy to go. Jodi shut the fridge door and followed them out.

Unlike Julian, Zack was inclusive, charming, and emotionally attuned. If Jodi was trying to get out of Friday-night plans—like tonight—he’d be the first person to text her outside of the group chat

and ask what's up. When Paige's junior-year boyfriend was caught cheating, Zack punched him in the middle of the quad, and then went straight to Paige's house with a vat of rocky road. Zack was . . . pretty great. Jodi had known him for ten years and been in love with him for a little less than that. But everyone was in love with Zack Thrasher.

The only thing she wished Zack was better at? Not splitting his time and attention in thousands of different directions.

"Is that a Bentley?" His eyes popped out of his head, and he darted to the garage where a couple of guys were smoking pot next to a shiny silver car. Monica eagerly followed, leaving Jodi, Julian, and Matt behind.

Maybe it was selfish of her to want him all to herself, but even times when it was just the two of them at Lucy's volleyball game, he'd find a way to invite three people to sit with them, making new friends wherever he went. Zack was Jodi's best friend. But she was only one of Zack's *many* best friends.

As Julian bummed a smoke off a guy with long hair on a beach chair, Matt turned to Jodi, staring at her with new eyes.

"So how do you know Zack Thrasher?" Matt asked. Jodi got the impression he still didn't know she didn't go to school with him, but Matt plowed on without an answer. "He's like Sacramento royalty or something. I dunno."

"Royalty," Julian hummed. "I like the sound of that."

"He said Zack, not you." Jodi sipped her water.

"Hm. Lucy is queen, Paige is a princess . . ." He tilted his head down at her. "What are you, cupcake?" Jodi swallowed, knowing how this was going to end. "Maybe you're the court jester. You entertain the king, you're fun at dinners, but you don't really belong."

She clenched her jaw, ignoring Matt as he watched the two of them like a tennis match. Turning her eyes to Julian, she took in his cool hazel gaze over the rim of his red cup.

"You can insult me, ignore my texts, conveniently 'forget me'

after pep rallies”—she hadn’t forgotten about that one—“but I’m not going anywhere.” She pressed her lips together and hissed, “Let’s just get through senior year. When you’re at your Ivy, you’ll never have to see me again.”

Julian’s eyes flickered in amusement. His lips parted—

“Jodi!” A familiar squeal pierced her ears, and she turned to see Paige running to her—shoeless. “There you are, babe.”

She was abruptly engulfed in Fantasy perfume and luscious blond waves. Jodi shook off the irritation that only Julian Hollister could cause her and hugged Paige tightly.

“Hey!” Jodi said. “Where’s Lucy?”

But her question was answered a moment later. Over Paige’s shoulder, she saw Lucy walking down the steps to the backyard in what Jodi liked to call “Lucy-Slow-Motion.”

Lucy Reed was ridiculously hot—tall, with dark brown skin and thick black hair that always looked like it had been professionally mussed. She wasn’t only stunning, she was lethal. Lucy Reed wasn’t to be crossed. She took longer to warm up to than Paige, but once you were in with Lucy, you were friends for life.

As Lucy-Slow-Motion finally arrived at their side, Paige pulled back from her bone-crushing hug and played with Jodi’s hair. “This looks perfect, babe! You did the curls like I taught you!”

“It looks really good,” Lucy agreed.

Jodi’s chest swelled with the praise, glad she’d done something with her hair that was remotely close to Paige’s.

Paige was the antithesis to Lucy, but they complemented each other like oil and vinegar. Paige was a cheerleader, student council VP, and—hilariously—a mathlete. She was soft and bubbly where Lucy was hard and uncompromising. More often than not, the two of them went off and did their own thing, leaving Jodi to fend for herself against Julian. It was common knowledge that both Lucy and Paige were also in love with Zack.

It was weird from the outside, but there was no strain—as long as Zack didn't officially “choose” one of them.

“Oh, shit.” Matt ran a hand through his hair, his eyes flickering over the four of them. He took a deep breath, staring as if he'd seen a ghost. “You're the Thrashers.”

Jodi sighed and Julian rolled his eyes. The group name was stupid. They never called themselves that.

Lucy lifted a perfectly waxed brow. “And you are?”

All the bravado he'd had with Jodi melted away, and with an odd little nod, he said, “M-Matt.”

Lucy stepped forward, and Matt audibly gulped. “My name's Lucy Reed. Not ‘Thrasher #4’ or whatever.”

“Right. Sorry. Can I get you a drink?”

She reached forward and grabbed Matt's beer out of his hand. “I already have one.”

Lucy always seemed pretty badass when she had a few drinks in her, but Jodi knew that the real reason she stole guys' drinks was because she knew they wouldn't be drugged. She'd told Jodi that she had to learn that trick the hard way freshman year.

“Are you having fun, Matt?” Paige asked, sizing him up with a gleam in her eye.

“One hundo,” Matt said, and Julian snorted into his drink. “How do you guys know Caroline?”

“We don't.” Julian smiled. “We're just not allowed to party with our own kind.”

The dig flew over Matt's head as his eyes widened and he lowered his voice. “That's right. New Helvetia High, right? Didn't a girl just die? Did you know her?”

Like the music cutting out before the beat dropped—Caroline Vallow's party was no longer an easy distraction.

Jodi froze, like she did any time Emily's name was mentioned on TV, or in the hallways before final exams, or behind cupped palms

as she passed. Paige took a sharp breath next to her, something she'd started doing a month ago, complaining that sometimes she couldn't breathe. Julian went very still, staring down into his cup. With her eyes intent on Matt, Lucy smiled, low and catlike, as if he'd said something amusing.

"Not really," Lucy answered finally. But the damage was done. Matt returned her gaze with a wary expression. "I think I had two classes with her."

Paige took another deep breath, the rattle in her ribs echoing in Jodi's ears.

"Did she really OD on prom night?"

Jodi's feet were moving, her body following like a marionette led by its strings. Someone called after her, but she pushed aside the sliding glass door and disappeared inside. The cool blast of AC on a muggy July evening pushed air into her lungs as she steered herself toward the downstairs bathroom. She threw herself inside and locked it before she took her next breath.

Jodi leaned on the sink. In the mirror, she saw a short girl with a plain face. Someone people would describe her as "curvy" to be polite. She pressed her eyes closed, and concentrated on her breath.

Pale blue eyes rose up from the depths of her mind where she had buried them. A smattering of freckles on a thin nose, and teeth too wide for a small mouth.

Jodi turned on the taps. Her own eyes stared back at her from the mirror, brown and dark-lined. Hand soap was the only thing on the counter, so she pumped some Crabtree & Evelyn into her palm and counted to thirty as that voice slithered against her ears, dreamy and haunting.

"Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to be you."

Jodi looked up from her biology book. "Me?"

Emily nodded, her thin blond hair shimmering around her cheekbones. "A Thrasher."

The ding of a new text jolted her out of her thoughts. It was an unknown number with a Sacramento area code. All the message said was—*are you having a nice summer?*

She stared down at the screen, trying to place the number, waiting for it to make sense.

A knuckle rapped against the bathroom door, and Zack's voice sounded through the wood—"Jo?"

She quickly dried her hands and twisted the doorknob. Zack leaned against the frame, his eyes cautious and his shoulders blocking out the rest of the party.

"Can I come in?"

She stepped aside for him. He locked the door and sat on the closed toilet seat. "What's going on? Paige said you freaked out."

Rolling her eyes, she leaned back on the sink. "I didn't 'freak out,' okay? Just . . . somebody asked about Emily." Jodi pushed her thumb into her opposite palm, rubbing the pressure point. "The last two weeks of school were bad enough. I didn't know it was going to continue into summer."

"That's why I wanted to come to a St. Joseph's party. I thought no one would mention it." He ran a hand through his hair and glanced up at her. "You don't have to feel . . . guilty or anything."

She looked down to her shoes and muttered, "I don't feel *guilty*."

"You're hiding in a bathroom."

She leveled a glare at him. "I just . . . Don't you think about her?"

"Yeah. A lot," he said, voice rasping. His eyes seemed to glaze over as he thought. "She's everywhere, you know? I think I dream about her sometimes. I can never remember it, but I get the feeling like I do."

Jodi nodded. "I do, too."

Just last night, she'd dreamt they were doing homework together like they used to. She'd woken up just when Emily asked, "What time is the limo picking me up?" Jodi had stared at the ceiling for the next hour until she heard her dad moving around.

Zack jumped up from the toilet and took her elbows. “Come on. Let’s go play beer pong or something.” He pinched her side, and she jerked away with a yelp. He smirked in that way that made her stomach tumble.

Three harsh pounds of a fist on the bathroom door. Before Jodi could yell for them to chill, a deep *adult* voice bellowed, “Come on out.”

Zack’s brows pulled together as he opened the door, coming face to face with a police officer with a thick blond mustache.

“Zackary Thrasher?”

Jodi blinked and registered the quiet coming from the dining room. The group of twenty had vanished. Someone’s joint was still curling smoke up to the chandelier.

“Yeah?”

“I need you to come with me, son.”

Zack glanced back at her. “Sure. Where we going?”

“We have a few questions for you down at the station.”

Jodi felt her pulse hammering in her veins. “This can’t wait till morning?” she asked, her voice cracking.

The blond cop’s eyes slid to her. “Jodi Dillon?” Her heart choked her as she nodded. “You, too.”

Zack stepped in front of her. “Officer, this isn’t necessary. If we call my dad, I’m sure—”

“What’s ‘not necessary’ is me Breathalyzing you and ordering a drug test when we get to the station. Would you like to *make it* necessary?” He lifted a brow, and his mustache twitched when Zack swallowed thickly. “Let’s go.”

Zack moved out of the bathroom and Jodi followed. The cop filed in behind them as Zack led them out the front door and across the lawn full of whispering teenagers trying to hide their red cups. Some of them had their phones raised high overhead to capture the moment.

The cop turned to the remaining party and yelled, “I’ll be back through in an hour! Clear out!”

There were two cop cars parked in the cul-de-sac, their red and blue lights off but their headlights bright on the front of the house. Another cop was assisting someone getting into the back seat of the first cruiser—Julian. Paige and Lucy were already inside, looking straight ahead with their lips shut tight as Julian slid in. The door closed with a thud.

The blond cop helped them into the second car as a crowd formed on the lawn. In the quiet as the cop came around to the driver's seat, Zack whispered, "Don't say anything."

She jerked her head in a nod. Her mind flew through the possible reasons for this, dismissing each as more unlikely than the last, but circling around one explanation like suds in a drain.

And so softly—to himself almost—Zack breathed, "This is about Emily."

Chapter Two



Jodi and Zack were silent the whole ride. She tried to make eye contact with him, but he gazed out the window, biting the inside of his cheek. Jodi couldn't stop staring at the metal grate separating the front seat from the back—separating the cops from the criminals. Her heart hammered in her chest as the car parked in front of a sign for the Sacramento Police Department. The cop swiftly stepped out and opened the door for them.

She'd never been to the police station. She'd never been arrested. She wasn't under arrest *now*. Jodi's mind spun as they climbed the steps to the building, but—the cop had said “a few questions” when talking to Zack. They hadn't been cuffed.

The fluorescent lights inside the police station made her eyes water as the cop led them past the front desk, through the metal detectors, and back to a waiting area where Julian, Lucy, and Paige were already seated.

“Wait here.” The cop pointed to the chairs and walked away.

Lucy tilted her head, her arms crossed and her legs stuck out in front of her, taking up as much space as possible with a vicious look

in her eyes. Next to her, Julian was texting with a downward twist to his lips. Paige brushed a tear from her cheek. She was still barefoot, her shoes lost at the Vallow house.

Dropping into the only open chair, Jodi took Paige's hand as it bounced on her knee. Paige flashed her a thin smile.

It was quiet except for the squeak of a chair at the front desk. She focused on the smell of burnt coffee and the warmth of Paige's hand.

Zack paced in front of them, running his fingers through his hair. Suddenly his hand went to his pocket, before he looked up to Julian. "My phone's still dead. Can you—"

"Your dad is on his way."

Taking a deep breath, Zack nodded in thanks.

Zack's dad was a lawyer. One of the best in town. Jodi knew this because he didn't need bench ads or billboards off I-5. He did criminal cases, but she couldn't remember which kind.

Paige snatched her hand back and started biting her thumbnail. "I don't have to call my mom, do I?"

"We're minors," Lucy said. "We shouldn't be here. We could probably leave."

"Okay," Jodi said. "Can we go then?"

Julian sighed. "He said he'd Breathalyze us and ticket us for underage drinking. Best to figure out what this is about before we try to go anywhere."

"But we're not, like . . . under arrest, right?" Paige asked. "This isn't on our record or . . . God, I dunno."

"We're not under arrest." Lucy stood and shook out her shoulders. She looked at Jodi. "Jodi, you should go."

Jodi felt all eyes turn on her. "What?"

"You didn't drink. You should take the Breathalyzer and walk out of here."

She stared at Lucy, her mouth opening and closing. "And what? *Walk* home?"

“Call an Uber. Or, I’ll call one for you.” Lucy whipped her phone out of her pocket.

Jodi frowned. “I’m not leaving you guys. Let’s just find out what they want. Stick together, or whatever.”

She turned her eyes on Zack. He was staring at Lucy, his jaw working as his gaze seemed to communicate something with her.

A door opened, and all five of them turned at the sound.

A slender Asian woman in a tight pantsuit clicked her way into the room on four-inch heels. Her dark hair was pulled back into a severe, yet youthful, ponytail. With her was a young officer with peach fuzz who stood a few paces back. She scanned the five of them and planted her feet.

“‘The Thrashers.’ What a pleasure.” When her eyes landed on Jodi, she felt ice licking down her spine. “I’ll take Barefoot and Box-Dye first. Look for some sandals or something in lost and found,” she said to the officer.

Jodi narrowed her eyes at the woman once she realized that Box-Dye was *her*.

Zack jumped up. “Miss, can I ask what this is about?”

“You can call me Detective Harding.”

He thrust his hand out. “Zack Thrasher. Good to meet you, Detective.”

Detective Harding glanced down at his hand before gripping it firmly. “Zack.”

“Are we under arrest or . . . ?”

“No,” she replied with a thin smile. “Just a couple of questions, that’s all.”

“Are we legally allowed to leave, then?” Julian said.

Her gaze snapped to where he slouched in his chair, and she looked him over—from his styled, messy hair down to his designer tennis shoes. “I don’t know, Julian, are you legally sober?”

Jodi blinked at the bite in her words, and as Julian sat up taller, she realized Detective Harding had already known his name.

“How did you know to look for us at a St. Joseph’s party?” Paige asked.

The detective pulled her phone out of her pocket and tapped the screen. “You made it easy, Paige.”

When she turned her phone toward them, Paige and Lucy’s faces filled the screen. They were in Lucy’s Jeep in today’s outfits, just hours before. The text across the Instagram story said, Party on Fortune Ct—come thru!

Julian dropped his head back and sighed. Paige’s lip trembled.

“Come on, girls.”

The detective spun on her stiletto, her ponytail swinging over her shoulder as she clicked back toward the door. Paige followed, her pink toenails bright against the linoleum. Jodi looked one last time to Zack and left.

Behind the door was a short hallway lined with offices on the left and closed doors on the right. Detective Harding stopped at a room labeled 202 and twisted the knob. The overhead lights sprang on. Jodi could make out a table with four mismatched chairs.

“Miss Dillon. If you could wait here while I get Miss Montgomery settled.”

Jodi stepped past her and took in the empty room. She met Paige’s wide eyes just as the detective closed the door.

They were separating them.

She didn’t know much about detective work that she couldn’t learn from reruns of *Law & Order* or *Castle*, but she knew that if they were being interviewed separately, something was up.

Jodi spun to look at the walls, trying to figure out if they had one of those two-way mirrors, but there was just a small window overlooking the parking lot and a couple of inspirational posters about teamwork. She sat in an orange plastic chair facing the door and waited.

How long would they be here? Lucy told her to walk out, but could she do that? If she walked up to the guard at the front and told them she was going home, would they let her?

Like a splash of cold water over her face, Jodi thought, *Did they call my dad?*

She rubbed the space between her eyes that had started to ache. When she'd left a few hours ago, there had been a graveyard of Corona bottles at her father's feet, the game on and the easy chair occupied—a usual Friday night. He shouldn't be driving anywhere, especially not to a police station that was a little trigger-happy with their Breathalyzer.

Jodi's cheeks flamed at the thought of her friends seeing her dad, bleary-eyed and beer-stained. Zack knew. Zack knew that there were some nights that Jodi just needed to get out of the house. Zack knew not to ask questions, just show up, open her bedroom window, and help her climb out. But the others only saw her dad at school functions and briefly when they swung by to pick her up. She had to pray that he was passed out already, unable to hear the phone.

She sighed and sat back, thinking about what kinds of questions she'd be asked. Zack seemed confident that this whole thing was about Emily.

Her chest tightened, and she squeezed her eyes closed.

Emily Mills.

They didn't talk about her. Not since it happened. That helped Jodi not *think* about her too much as well.

Emily had been a year younger than them, a sophomore last year. If not for Emily's advanced placements in math and science, Jodi wouldn't have gotten to know her at all. Emily was . . . nice, if a bit . . .

Jodi cracked her knuckles and rolled her shoulders back, trying to shake off those thoughts. *Don't speak ill of the dead* and all that. But it wasn't unkind; it was true. Emily had been strange. She'd ask personal questions that acquaintances had no business asking. Every day she'd wear the same pair of orange Converse, orange backpack, and orange earrings. She'd stand too close to you when she talked.

Emily Mills might have been odd—a little moon-eyed—but the

one thing she had in common with every other girl at New Helvetia? She was in love with Zack Thrasher.

When Emily had killed herself on prom night, Jodi had been in the limo with her friends, laughing and breathing in the smell of summer right around the corner. Zack's older sister had provided enough alcohol for five limos, and Julian had drunk almost half of it by the time they got to the dance. At the start of the spring semester, Lucy had decreed that all five of them would go stag that year. Lucy claimed she wanted an excuse to break up with her girlfriend, but Jodi knew there were several motivations behind this, not least of all that Zack would be forced to be single that night.

They'd danced, they'd laughed, they'd taken official prom pictures standing front-to-back, and when they left early to drive lazily around the luxurious streets between 40th and 49th, nicknamed the Fab Forties, two cop cars had careened past. An ambulance followed.

It was Emily's street. Jodi had been there often to study, sometimes even forced into dinner with the whole family. Not to mention the handful of times they'd picked Emily up or dropped her off after a night out.

Jodi had knocked on the window, asking the driver to squeeze down 35th. The limo had turned and stopped, unable to pass the emergency vehicles with their flashing lights. Jodi had stumbled bare-foot onto the sidewalk, ignoring the calls from the others.

She had been frozen in her aquamarine prom dress, staring in horror as Emily's mother tried to tug a gurney carrying a black body bag back inside of the house, screaming at the paramedics. Emily's father stood off to the side with a trembling jaw, talking to a cop who was taking notes. In the corner of the patio, on the porch swing Jodi had sat in a few times over the past year, a small blond figure was swaying in the breeze, staring right at her.

Hannah Mills looked so much like her older sister that it had taken Jodi several moments to realize that it wasn't Emily herself.

Hannah hadn't taken her eyes off Jodi the whole time, something unrecognizable in the shy girl's eyes. Something haunted.

The door to the room swung open, and Jodi jumped. Detective Harding strolled in with a file tucked under her arm and a fire-engine-red mug in one hand. She tugged out the opposite chair, the metal scraping against the linoleum, and sat.

Jodi watched as she flipped open the folder and clicked a pen, all without glancing up at her.

"I hear you don't drink, Miss Dillon."

Her eyes met Jodi's, head tilted slightly to the left. Jodi was frozen in confusion.

"What?"

"It was one of the first things out of Mr. Thrasher's mouth. 'Jodi isn't drunk. You can't keep her here.'" Detective Harding clicked her pen several times in rapid succession, and Jodi realized that she'd already questioned Zack. "Is it a personal choice?"

Jodi blinked. "Is that really what you want to question me about?"

Detective Harding's lips pulled up in a quick smile as she reached for her mug. "Just curious, is all. I don't know many teenagers who don't drink." She leaned forward, like they had a secret. "Much less ones who are in the popular crowd."

She sipped her drink. Her lipstick color matched the mug perfectly.

"Yes, it's a personal choice." Her mind flashed through images of empty beer bottles, the smell of stale alcohol on her father's breath. "It's fine. I can DD for my friends."

The words slipped out of her mouth before she could pull them back. She looked up at Detective Harding and found a smirk playing at the corner of her mouth. She furrowed her brow in mock confusion and flipped through the file on the table.

"You have your driver's license? I thought you didn't—"

"I just mean . . . I take care of them. At parties. DD is like, such a general term these days."

“Of course.” Detective Harding smiled, and Jodi could see her perfectly straight teeth cresting just on top of her ripe, red bottom lip. Jodi’s skin felt tight. She was hyperaware of every blink, every pause she took. “Do you often have to ‘take care of them?’ Your friends?”

Jodi’s brows knitted together before she could stop them. “What do you mean?”

She looked down at her notes. “I mean, you have a 3.9 GPA.”

“I think Paige has a 4.2, so what—”

“What about Mr. Thrasher and his 3.3? He and Miss Montgomery earned those grades? It wasn’t something you ‘took care of’ for them?”

Jodi reeled back. “No. Zack and Paige have private tutors. Why would they need to cheat off me?”

“You don’t have a private tutor, Miss Dillon?” she said, scribbling something illegible on her notepad. Jodi angled her head to see if she could catch it.

“No, I can’t aff—” She cut off. Detective Harding’s gaze came up to hers, and Jodi felt pinned by it. Heat rose in her cheeks. “I get my own grades and so do they.”

“But they *do* pay for theirs. One way or another. Right?” Her eyes sparkled, and she crossed her legs.

For someone wearing Louboutins, Harding sure loved to dig about money. The red soles of the shoes flashed at her, and Jodi glanced at them again. Scuffed and shiny, plastic. They were fake. Jodi should know—she’d had enough designer fakes herself to keep up with Paige and Lucy.

Jodi raised a brow, examining Detective Harding as she uncrossed her legs, the corner of her mouth tight, like she’d been caught. She cleared her throat.

“How did you know Emily Mills?”

“She was a classmate.”

“And that’s all? You wouldn’t consider her a friend?”

“You asked me how I knew her, not what our relationship was. We met at school, ergo—classmate.”

“Were you friends with Emily Mills?” she rephrased.

Jodi’s tongue was like sandpaper in her mouth. “Kinda. A little.”

“Did she ever talk to you about her depression? Did she ever mention suicide to you?”

The word jarred her. *Suicide*. It made her pulse slow, then race. Jodi felt like the air was being leached from the room. “We weren’t really close enough for those kind of talks.”

“Your friends indicated that Emily was the kind of person who”—she looked down at her notes—“overshared. Mr. Hollister said she ‘latched on by giving you too many personal details.’”

If she’d already interviewed Zack and Julian, was Jodi last? What did that mean?

“Um, yeah. I guess that’s right.”

“But she never talked to you about suicide?”

Jodi pushed her thumb into her palm, focusing on the burn of the pressure point. In her mind, a flash of memory—a *school bus rocking. The sweaty seat under her thighs. Pale blue irises pinning her against the window seat.*

“I’ll protect you.”

Pain lanced across her wrist as the pressure point flared. She shook out her fingers and spread her hands across the tabletop.

“Never,” Jodi said.

Detective Harding stared at her, picking her apart. She placed her elbows on the table, inches away from Jodi’s fingertips.

“Why do *you* think Emily Mills killed herself?” Detective Harding asked softly. Almost motherly.

“I don’t know.”

She tilted her head at Jodi. “You don’t?”

The door burst open, banging off the wall. Jodi jerked back.

Gregory Thrasher, Zack’s dad, stood in the doorway, all six foot

four of him. Even in dark jeans and a polo shirt, he looked like he could sway an entire jury with one flash of blue eyes.

"You're done," he bit out. "Let's go, Jodi." Just behind his shoulder, she could see Zack hovering in the hallway.

"Greg Thrasher, what a surprise," Detective Harding singsonged. "She's a minor, Chelsea. They all are."

"All of them?" She smiled, and her eyes flashed to Zack. "We were just having a conversation." She shrugged. "She's free to go."

Mr. Thrasher reached for Jodi's elbow, guiding her into the hallway. He spun back to the detective and hissed, "If you ever pull a stunt like this again—with *my* son—I'll have you reported."

Her wide red lips parted on a gleaming smile. "Always a pleasure, Greg." She looked past him to Zack. "You look so much like your dad did in high school. See, we go way back."

Greg spun on his heel and marched out toward the lobby, Zack following closely. Jodi gave one last look to Detective Harding, who was leaning on the doorframe. She winked at her, and Jodi scurried past.

The others were already waiting for them, including Paige's mom, who always looked like she'd just stepped off the Peloton.

"Greg," she said, tugging at the sleeves of her Lululemon zip-up. "What's going on?"

"It's all good, Cheryl. Let's—" He glanced at the officers manning the phones and flipping through case files. "Let's talk outside."

Placing a hand on his son's shoulder, Mr. Thrasher steered him out. Mrs. Montgomery walked with Paige and Lucy. Before she could follow, Jodi was slowed by a hand on her elbow. She looked up to see Julian matching her pace as they passed the metal detectors.

"What did she ask you?" he whispered.

Jodi almost stumbled, so unused to Julian Hollister touching her. She shrugged a shoulder. "Probably the same things she asked all of us. 'How did you know Emily? Did you know she was going to kill herself—'"

“What did you say?” Julian squeezed her elbow, forcing her to slow.

Jodi ripped out of his grasp just as an officer stood from the front desk, saying goodnight to them with a curious look.

Julian smiled at him and wrapped his arm around her shoulders instead—like they were *together* or something. Jodi recoiled.

“Can you not?”

“What did you say?”

“I said I didn’t know!” She shook free of him and lengthened her strides to catch up with Paige and Lucy. Paige’s mom was with Mr. Thrasher in front of his BMW, speaking quietly while Zack stood off to one side.

“Are you both okay?” Jodi asked.

Paige nodded, but still looked about ready to cry.

Lucy shrugged. “Fine. I don’t think Detective Hardass likes me much.”

“Lucy didn’t say anything,” Paige told Jodi, awed. “She didn’t answer a single question. She just stared at her.”

“Hey.” Julian stepped up to them and jerked his head to Zack to call him over. “No texts. No DMs. Don’t put anything in writing.” He looked at Zack. “Right?”

Zack nodded. “Maybe vanish mode on Instagram or Snapchat messaging—I’ll have to ask my dad about it.”

Jodi squinted at them. “Isn’t that extreme? We’re not being accused of anything.”

“Sure we are,” Lucy scoffed. “A girl is dead because we didn’t invite her in our prom limo—”

“Luce,” Zack tried.

“You know that’s what they’re saying—”

“That’s not what happened though!” Jodi lowered her voice to a hiss. “Emily was unstable. She was strange. We all knew that. This isn’t our fault. We didn’t do anything to her to make her kill herself.”

It was quiet. Zack opened his mouth—and closed it.

“Is that what you told Harding?” Lucy asked.

Jodi blinked at her. “No. I didn’t say anything, really.”

“Kids!” Mr. Thrasher waved them over. “Let’s go. Paige and Lucy with Cheryl. The rest of you with me.”

Jodi trudged toward the Thrashers’ car under a flickering streetlamp. She slipped into the back seat next to Julian, and as she reached for her seat belt, she cast one more glance at the police station.

A figure in a high ponytail and blazer stood in one of the back windows, watching the parking lot as she sipped from her bright red mug.