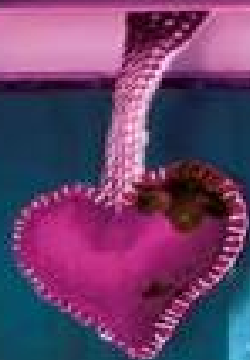


*Either you're in  
or you're out*

EM

# THE THRASHERS

xoxo



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JULIE SOTO



the  
*Thrashers*  
a novel

Julie Soto

W  
WEDNESDAY BOOKS  
NEW YORK

[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

**Thank you for buying this  
Wednesday Books ebook.**

To receive special offers, bonus content,  
and info on new releases and other great reads,  
sign up for our newsletters.

**Sign Up**

Or visit us online at  
[us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup](http://us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup)

For email updates on the author, click [here](#).

The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you for your personal use only. You may not make this e-book publicly available in any way. **Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at: [us.macmillanusa.com/piracy](http://us.macmillanusa.com/piracy).**

For Anna, Amanda, and Fancy Margaret

# 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 barbeque 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 barefoot 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.

## Chapter Three

“You are minors. You have more protections than adults,” Greg Thrasher was saying from the driver’s seat. “You not only have the right to an attorney, but you have the right to your legal guardian.”

Jodi stared down into her lap, twisting the ring she wore around her thumb. She knew these things. She should have used her freaking brain and realized that she didn’t need to answer any questions without her dad there.

Zack was the only one who didn’t need a parent, and even then, he should have lawyered up. Though he’d always looked like the youngest of them, with his baby face and inviting blue eyes, Zack’s eighteenth birthday had been in March. He’d been held back when he was younger, repeating second grade and joining the class below—Jodi’s class. She’d been the only kid not to make fun of him for being “stupid.” Four years later, he’d been diagnosed with ADHD.

“What if they have something on us?” Julian asked, leaning forward in the seat next to her. “We’d all been drinking. The cop that came for me and the girls made it sound like we were being carted away and Breathalyzed.”

““Good evening, officer. Am I under arrest?”” Mr. Thrasher recited, turning the car onto the freeway. ““Am I allowed to call my father? I’m seventeen years old.’ Say it with witnesses. If he denies your request, you better hope those camera phones were on.”

“Oh god.” Zack ran his hand over his face. “Dad, there were a lot of phones in our faces at the party—”

“I know. I’m having Patricia draft a statement.”

“Dad. I don’t need your firm to put out a press release.”

“You do if you five want to go to college.”

Jodi’s eyes widened, and the boys fell silent. “Is that—is that a possibility? That colleges will see?”

“It wasn’t an arrest. How would it go on our record?”

“Just from TikTok?”

“I’m just saying”—he raised a placating hand—“that you need to keep all your records clean.”

The car was silent as they turned off the freeway. Jodi pulled out her phone for the first time since the party and saw *thousands* of notifications—tags on Instagram, X, TikTok; Snapchat messages, texts, DMs. It would take her hours to go through these and untag herself in the videos taken at the party. But there was nothing from her dad.

“Mr. Thrasher, did you ... did you call my dad?”

“No, I was going to leave that to you, Jodi. I didn’t know if he was home.” He turned around in the seat.

“Yeah, he’s here this weekend. I guess I’ll go home and explain it to him.”

He smoothly switched into the left-turn lane and took them away from the nice side of town.

Zack stared straight ahead, tapping his fingers on the armrest. Julian’s gaze was out the window, faced away from her. Despite being the worst student of them all, Julian was all about college. He wanted East Coast, and he wanted it now. If you so much as brought up college applications, he would talk your ear off about which water polo schools were coming to see him play this fall. He needed to get out of Sacramento like he needed air.

Jodi didn’t have that. The only extracurricular she had was art, but with her grades, she could at least get into state school, maybe one or two UCs if she buckled down senior year. Having college ripped from her—that didn’t really scare her. What scared her was Zack going to USC and never speaking to her again. Lucy becoming a movie star and forgetting her name. Paige running for Congress in ten years and trying to bury pictures of them. She’d thought about just moving to LA, finding an apartment, and starting city college there, just to be close to Zack. But it made her feel pathetic.

The car turned onto her street and slowed to find the narrow lane packed with cars and people on lawns. The neighbor three houses down always

threw parties on Friday nights, and as Mr. Thrasher slowed to squeeze between a double-parked car, Jodi flushed bright red.

It made her uncomfortable to be seen getting out of Zack's Mustang on this street, but the BMW made it ten times worse. She felt her neighbors' eyes on the car as they stopped at her house. Her dad's old Corolla was in their driveway.

"Thank you," she said, unclicking her seat belt. "I promise I'll tell my dad."

"Have him call me if he has questions. I'm going to look into what Chelsea filed on you all, so if anything happens like this again, we'll be prepared."

Jodi nodded, saying her goodbyes. As she rounded the car, Zack's window rolled down.

"Hey, I'll text you tomorrow."

Then Julian's voice called out from the back seat, "Snapchat!"

Some of the weight lifted off her heart. She walked up the driveway, fumbling the house key out of her bra. They waited for her to open the door and wave before driving off, and then Jodi kicked off her shoes and tiptoed into the living room.

Her dad was just where she'd left him, round belly protruding from the armchair toward the television, infomercials blasting loud enough to wake a normal person. A heavy snore rang to her ears, and she breathed a sigh of relief. Her dad's snoring was legendary, but sometimes he didn't make a sound, and Jodi had to press her shaking fingers to the pulse in his neck just to give herself peace of mind.

Hank Dillon was a truck driver for a big delivery company. He would spend six or seven days on the road, sleeping in his truck or stopping at a motel, before unloading and turning back around. He was gone every other weekend, but Jodi was fine with it as long as they had one day a week to get dinner at their favorite hole-in-the-wall or go to the Roseville golfing arena. When he was on the road, Jodi had the Burnses next door for emergencies, or she'd spend the night with her friends. Sometimes if he was assigned to the Florida route, she'd stay with her grandmother and aunt for the week, but it was hard to hear her mom's sister and mother talk about how much of a failure her dad was. They'd whisper about how Jodi didn't eat carrots, didn't exercise, didn't go to church anymore. It was annoying.

Her dad gave a mighty snore, and Jodi quickly bent to pick up the beer bottles at his feet and took them to the kitchen. She turned the TV off, turned the fan on, and grabbed a glass of water for each of them.

The school newsletter hung on the fridge under a Goofy magnet, and Jodi let her eyes pass over the memorized words.

*As many of you know, we suffered the tragic loss of Emily Mills (Class of '26) in May. The Millses would like to invite the entire school to a memorial on the New Helvetia football field on August 9.*

That was just under two weeks from now. Jodi stared at Emily's yearbook photo, which was included in the announcement. Just behind it, conveniently covered by other magnets, was a short note Jodi had been ignoring all month. It was from Emily's mother, Maureen, inviting her over any time if she was sad or wanted to talk about Emily.

Jodi had asked the others if they'd gotten a note in the mail, too. They hadn't.

She couldn't imagine sitting down with Maureen Mills, lying to her about what good friends she and Emily had been and trying to tell her stories about their fun times together. Sure, Jodi had been conned into a few more shopping and movie dates than the others, but that's because saying no to Emily Mills was like kicking a puppy.

*A girl is dead because we didn't invite her in our prom limo.*

Was Lucy right? Were they partially to blame for this? Was that why Detective Harding was looking into them?

No one had invited Emily in the limo. Emily shouldn't have assumed they would—she wasn't *friends* with them. Not close enough, at least. She wondered where Emily's wires had gotten crossed. Sophomores needed to be invited by upperclassmen to prom, so there must have been a misunderstanding if she was in her dress when she died.

Shaking her head clear, Jodi set a water glass next to her dad and went to her room. It was themed in monochromatic gray with pops of blue—a pillow, her desk lamp, the art on the wall. Her desk was cluttered with summer reading she was ignoring, opened makeup palettes, and her sketchbooks. Jodi's charcoals and watercolors hung on the walls next to pictures of her and Zack. She climbed into her bed after a quick scrub with

a makeup remover wipe, dismissing the notifications flashing on her phone. Too many tags to go through now. There was a text from Lucy, asking her if she got home okay—which she always sent to each of them after a night out. She responded and saw that she'd missed texts from her while they were at the party. Pictures of Lucy and Paige dancing, and the question **WHEER RU?**

Jodi tapped the picture to save it to the folder on her phone labeled *Blackmail* that she always joked about, but stopped when she realized a lens flare had cut a slice through both of their faces. If it had been done on purpose, it was awfully artsy. But by accident, it was odd. Like a knife slashing in the light, crossing their cheeks and jaws. It gave her the chills.

Just before she shut her phone off for the night, her eyes were drawn to the unknown number in her text list.

**are you having a nice summer?**

Jodi frowned and texted back, **Who is this?**

She waited twenty minutes for a response before finally lying back and waiting for sleep to come.

★ ★ ★

*“You’re Jodi Dillon.”*

*Jodi looked up from her calculus homework to find a blond girl staring down at her. “Yeah?”*

*“Cool.” The girl took the seat next to her. “I’m Emily. I follow you on Instagram. I’m EmilySmiles on there.”*

*She sure was. Her teeth were oddly wide for her mouth, and her eyes were big and bright. She stared at Jodi like she expected her to know all of her followers by their handle.*

*“Hi, Emily.” She didn’t know what else to say, so she flashed her a quick grin and turned back to her book.*

*“You’re Zack Thrasher’s best friend.”*

*There it was. It wouldn’t be the first or the last time that someone decided to talk to her, only looking for a way to get closer to Zack. It was unusual that the person was so forward with their intentions.*

*Jodi took a deep breath and looked up again. “Yep. That’s me.” She shut her book, ready to engage fully. “Are you a junior?”*

*“Sophomore. But I’m in your bio class.”*

*“Oh.” A flush rose in her cheeks. “Sorry, I didn’t recognize you—”*

*“It’s okay,” Emily said. “I sit behind you.”*

*Jodi nodded, staring at her and trying to figure out what it was about this girl that had the back of her neck prickling. “Did you ... did you want to study sometime? Or was there something you...?”*

*“No, no!” Emily shook her head and her hair fell into her eyes. She didn’t push it away. “I just wanted to meet you.”*

*“Right. ‘Zack Thrasher’s Best Friend.’” Jodi pointed a sarcastic thumb at herself, ready to begin her excuses for why she needed to get going.*

*“No, you. I wanted to meet you.” Emily’s blue eyes seemed to sparkle to life as she stared deep into Jodi’s. “You’re Jodi Dillon.”*

*She blinked at Emily, waiting for her to elaborate, but it seemed that “Jodi Dillon” was enough for her.*

*She felt her chest warm and something long-forgotten swell.*

★ ★ ★

When Jodi stumbled to the kitchen in the morning and opened the cupboards, she heaved a sigh. Nothing, or at least, nothing edible. She glanced at the empty chair in front of the TV and the undrunk glass of water, the snores now coming from the closed bedroom door at the end of the hall.

She’d texted him about groceries yesterday afternoon, and he’d agreed to pick them up. Jodi opened the fridge. The only new items were the beers.

Jodi scrubbed her face, slipped into the last of her clean clothes, and walked to the bus stop. Two stops later, she was shopping at the nearest store, her arm sagging under the weight of a grocery carrier filled with a gallon of milk, two boxes of cereal, and ten-for-\$10 frozen dinners. She heard her name by the checkout.

“Jodi.”

Maureen Mills was standing behind a shopping cart, a genuine smile on her tired face and fingertips playing with her crucifix necklace. Jodi’s lungs

seized. She felt like she was underwater.

“Mrs. Mills. Hi.”

Jodi saw a woman throwing herself over a body bag, screaming.

“It’s good to see you.” Mrs. Mills pushed her cart to the side, filled with vegetables, bread, and meat. Jodi tried to shift her carrier behind her. “I’ve been thinking about you a lot.”

Finding her voice, Jodi finally said, “I got your note in the mail. I’m really sorry that I haven’t come by.”

Mrs. Mills gave her a watery grin. “I understand. Everyone has different grief.”

Grief. Right. She was grieving Emily—that’s why she couldn’t bring herself to face her parents.

“I, um ... I’m looking forward to the memorial in August. Not—not looking *forward* to it, but—”

“I get it,” Mrs. Mills said kindly. “We had such a small service for the funeral, didn’t really invite anyone outside the family. I’m glad the school organized a way to let her friends say goodbye.”

Jodi nodded, wondering which friends Mrs. Mills meant. Did she know the police had questioned the only people who might fall into that category?

It was quiet for a moment that felt like an eternity. Jodi itched for something else to say in response, before finally settling on something. “Emily was a really nice person.”

Mrs. Mills’s left eye twitched at her daughter’s name, and her mouth wobbled into a grateful smile.

When she said nothing in return, Jodi continued. “How’s Hannah?”

“She’s—she’s still processing,” Maureen said. “We sent her to a computer science camp this summer to get her mind off everything, but she starts at New Helvetia this year.”

Jodi’s mouth opened and closed. “Great.”

“Listen, Jodi.” Mrs. Mills stepped closer and gripped her necklace in white fingers. “I know how much you meant to Emily. And I want to thank you for being there for her in April...”

“In April?”

“When she first tried. And you stopped her.”

Swallowing hard, Jodi said, “Tried what?”

Mrs. Mills's lips quivered. "We found it in her journal. When you stopped her from killing herself."

Jodi felt like a bucket of ice had been dumped down her shirt. "In April?" Her voice was weak.

"She wrote about it. So we know that she had been struggling for some time." Maureen wiped her eyes. "Robert and I are just so glad you talked her out of it then, so we all had a little more time with her."

Jodi felt like she'd misheard, like the entire universe had skipped forward and left her behind. "I'm so sorry, but I have no idea what you're talking about. I had no idea Emily tried to kill herself in April."

Maureen tilted her head, surprised. "She wrote it in her journal."

"Can I see it?" Jodi's heart was pounding.

"We don't have it." Maureen looked apologetic. "It's ... well, it's with Detective Harding."

Jodi's eyes widened at the detective's name. Harding's questions flared to life in her memory. *But she never talked to you about suicide?*

"Mrs. Mills, I promise you. If Emily had mentioned it to me, I would have told an adult." She rubbed her palm, searching her memories. "Maybe I didn't understand what she was saying at the time—"

"It's alright, Jodi," she said with a smile. "We're just so glad that—that you helped Emily when she needed it."

Acid rose in her stomach. It felt like a lie when Jodi smiled, agreeing.

"Well, I'll let you continue with your shopping." Mrs. Mills reached for her cart. "And if you ever need anything, please call. Emily told us that your dad is"—her eyes flicked to the frozen dinners—"out of town a lot."

Her cheeks heated. "Thanks. It was great to see you. I'll try to stop by soon. And um, I'll try to bring Zack and the others."

All the warmth drained from Maureen's face. "That's not necessary. Thank you." She wrapped her arms around her stomach, like someone had punched her in the gut. "I have no interest in seeing that boy ever again."

She blinked at Maureen. There was a sloshing in Jodi's ears. She felt herself sinking.

Maureen squeezed her shoulder with a tight smile. "Good to see you." Then she was pushing her cart down toward the whole grain crackers and out of sight.

Jodi struggled to catch her breath as she ran to the checkout, feeling like water was filling her lungs and closing her throat. She paid for her groceries and walked to the bus stop in a fog.

There was a journal, and the police needed it for some reason.

There was a journal, and Jodi wasn't sure they could trust what was inside of it.

## Chapter Four

Her head spun as she walked from the bus stop with two grocery bags dangling from her arms. Were they brought into the police station because of something in Emily's journal?

As she walked up to her house, the smell of paint fumes assaulted her nostrils. There was a tarp laid out on the neighbor's lawn and a department store mannequin on top. It was spray-painted bright pink. Oliver Burns ripped off his protective mask and adjusted his septum ring.

Jodi used to say hello to him, but when he'd stopped saying hello back in freshman year, she'd stopped, too. Since then, he'd gotten a bit of a reputation for "drugs and drag," as his Instagram bio and TikTok presence would say. He utilized the video app like a New Helvetia High gossip account with followers all over the Sacramento area. He'd tagged her in something Friday night—a mock-up of a mugshot, one for each of them.

He pushed his blue hair off his brow and pulled the bottom of his T-shirt up to wipe his sweating face. He was so thin—his hip bones popping out and his ribs like ladder steps. He hadn't been that thin last year. When they were younger, Oliver actually had a little meat on his bones. She still remembered that adorable asthmatic boy who used to stage plays with her in his backyard.

His shirt dropped, and he met her eyes. When she passed him on the sidewalk, she could swear she heard him start whistling "Jailhouse Rock."

Pushing open her front door with her shoe, Jodi quickly set down the bags in the kitchen.

"Jo?" Her dad's voice called.

“Yeah, it’s me.” She unpacked one bag and tossed it into the plastic bag that held all other plastic bags.

Footsteps came toward the kitchen. “Ah, shit. I’m sorry, I got in late and didn’t get to go to Save Mart.”

Jodi tossed the frozen dinners in the freezer drawer and straightened. “It’s okay. I got it. How was Houston?”

Her dad was in his pajamas still, rubbing his face with a frown. “San Antonio.”

“I got Texas right.”

“It was fine. Quick. What time did you get in last night?”

The memory of the police station swam up. Jodi took a deep breath, preparing herself. “Around two.”

“That’s pretty late, Jo,” he said, leveling his stare at her.

“Well, let’s pretend I said eleven then.” She flashed a grin at him.

He sighed. “Look, I know I said we’d do Topgolf today...”

Jodi’s throat tightened. “Oh. No, it’s fine.”

“It’s just that I took a quick overnight for Reno.”

She nodded. “That’s great.” She shoved the cereal into the cupboard.

“You sure? Is there anything new with you?”

Jodi smiled weakly. She thought of Dad’s shift tonight, and how he would cancel it if she told him anything about the cops. How he took these shifts when he got stressed about money. How he drank when he was stressed about money.

“Nothing new,” she said.

She finished unpacking the groceries and let her mind circle the conversation with Maureen and what Detective Harding had in that journal.

★ ★ ★

On Sunday, Paige offered to help her look for new hair colors. The “Box-Dye” comment had been gnawing at Jodi since Friday, and Paige had sensed it. They grabbed lunch first at Burr’s, the local ice cream parlor and sandwich shop.

“I like that one you sent me last night,” Paige said, wiping her hands on her napkin. “It’s very Lana Del Rey.”

Jodi tore her gaze away from a flyer on the table, announcing an art contest for twelve- to eighteen-year-olds. The winner just got their art hung at Burr's, but she still thought it was probably a long shot.

"Yeah, I just want it to look more natural."

"Totally." Paige pulled out her phone to take her "after" picture in her Instagram "before and after" foodie challenge. "Ugh, the hell is up with this?"

"What is it?"

"Every time I take pictures of food it's good, but when I take pics of a person"—she lifted her phone for a quick snap of Jodi mid-bite—"there's this freaking shadow."

Paige turned her phone around. Behind the image of Jodi, there was a flare of light, like a reflection off glass. Jodi turned around, but there was nothing there. "Huh. You know, Lucy's pictures had the same thing the other day."

"Really?" Paige's eyes snapped up to her. "Which ones?"

"From the Vallow party. There's this flare..."

She flipped to the pictures and extended her phone to Paige.

Jodi pushed her thumb against her palm. She shouldn't have mentioned it. Paige could fixate on small details like a conspiracy theorist. Her aunt saw a medium, so sometimes she thought she was an expert in "the weird."

She watched Paige scroll through, the color draining from her face.

"That's so creepy," Paige whispered. She handed Jodi's phone back, staring off over Jodi's shoulder. After a moment she whispered, "Do you ever think Emily's still here?"

Jodi blinked at her, wondering if she understood her. "Here? What do you mean?"

Paige didn't say anything for a second. Jodi watched her run her fingertips over her lips as she thought about something.

Trying to distract her, Jodi asked, "Zack invited us over later. Did you want to go?"

"Yeah," Paige said absently. She jerked to face Jodi. "Have you gotten any weird texts?"

Jodi felt her heartbeat in her fingertips. "Yeah. On Friday, just before the cops came."

Paige rubbed her sternum with the palm of her hand. “Can I see the number?”

Jodi grabbed her phone. Paige typed in the number into her phone when Jodi read it out, and as she hit the final seven, Jodi watched her take a shaking breath.

“What is it?”

Paige chewed on her nail, staring at her phone. “I got a text last month from that same number.”

Jodi swallowed. She kept her voice calm as she asked, “What did it say?”

“‘Are you having a nice summer?’ I thought it was a wrong number, obviously.”

“Maybe it’s someone who changed their number and forgot to let us know,” Jodi said.

Paige nodded slowly, staring out the side window at the busy boulevard. “Yeah. Maybe.”

Jodi’s phone buzzed. There, under her last text, appeared the words:

**This one will look great on you**, and a link to an auburn brown hair dye.

Jodi’s heart skipped. Paige read the text upside down, and her breath caught on a gasp.

Paige stood from the booth suddenly, her eyes whipping around the shop. Jodi looked, too. Only three other people inside, and none of them familiar.

Jodi stared at the message. “How did—”

“We have to go,” Paige interrupted, her voice thin. “She’s—Let’s go.”

Before Jodi could ask her what she meant, Paige was out of the booth and zipping toward the door. Jodi grabbed her things and tried to keep up. Instead of heading to the car, Paige moved quickly down the sidewalk, eyes wild.

“Where are you going?” Jodi asked, her short legs pumping to match her pace.

“Away. Someone was watching us. She was watching us—”

“Paige, stop!” Jodi grabbed her arm and dragged her under the awning for a doctor’s office. “Stop! Just take a breath!”

“I can’t!” Her eyes were wild. “I can’t *breathe*, Jodi. Every morning, I wake up and it feels like something is pressing on my chest. I went to my

doctor. I don't have asthma. I tried Lucy's inhaler, and it doesn't help!" Tears streamed down her cheeks, and Jodi's limbs were frozen as she watched strong, brilliant Paige Montgomery sob like a child. "It feels—it feels like she's *there*, Jodi. Like I wake up and *she's there*. With me. She's leaning on me, or sitting on me"—a rattling gasp—"watching me."

Jodi's fingertips pressed into Paige's arms, anchoring her. "Okay. Okay, I get it. You're freaked out. But Paige, the texts aren't from *her*. Someone is messing with us."

Jodi pulled out her phone to look at the text again. As Paige's mascara smeared and her breath caught, anger boiled in Jodi's gut. She opened the contact and hit the call button.

It rang and rang. After ten rings, Jodi gave up, frowning.

Paige was taking huge calming breaths and blowing them out slowly, leaning against the dirty brick wall.

"Let's go home. Or go get some coffee or something."

"No," Paige whined. "Your hair dye."

"I don't care about that. And I don't think we should be going anywhere near that beauty supply store today. Not if someone is watching us."

Paige nodded and, in a flash, she pulled Jodi into a tight hug. "Don't tell anyone, okay? About my chest?" she whispered.

Jodi's skin warmed. She was trusted—given this moment to hold, just for the two of them.

"Of course."



Paige drove them over to Zack's after, and by the time they punched in the gate code and coasted down the driveway, Jodi could tell Paige had buried her breakdown deep.

The Thrashers lived in one of those houses that you couldn't really believe existed outside of television. There was a fountain in front, a pool out back, and six bedrooms in between. Paige parked in the circular driveway, and they walked around to the side door.

Zack was at the kitchen island with his tutor, a UC Davis student who disliked interruptions, especially when they were Jodi. They knocked on the

glass, and Zack was all too happy to jump up from the counter and let them in. The tutor glared at them.

“Hi, Peter Kim!” Paige said with a cheery wave. Peter’s jaw twitched.

“I didn’t know you had tutoring today,” Jodi said, sliding the door closed behind her.

“Neither did I. Dad wants me to do three times a week if I still can’t pass chemistry after the summer session.”

“Which doesn’t seem likely,” Peter said flatly, turning pages in the textbook.

Zack rolled his eyes. “I’ll be done in half an hour. Go hang by the pool. Julian’s out there.”

“Oh, wonderful,” Jodi said drily.

“Can I grab one of Katherine’s swimsuits?” Paige said, already heading toward the stairs for Zack’s older sister’s room.

“Yep.”

Jodi stood awkwardly, wanting to wait for Paige to come back before heading outside to be alone with Julian. Peter sent her a pointed glare, and she sighed. Jodi dropped her bag by the door and headed out back.

The Thrashers’ pool sparkled in the afternoon sun. Lounge chairs lined the sides, and there was a rock waterfall next to the diving board. And in the water—in an inflatable yellow duck with sunglasses—sat Julian Hollister, also in sunglasses, a bored look on his face and an iced tea in his hand.

“Don’t you have your own pool to float in?” she bit out.

He tilted his sunglasses down and said, “How’s life at the community pool?”

She dropped down on the lawn chair, about to argue that she didn’t use *any* pool, if she could help it, but Julian was already paddling the water, turning the duck around and away from her. She was just opening Instagram when her name was called. Zack’s stepmom was flip-flopping her way down the steps, smiling at her.

Charity had married Mr. Thrasher when Zack was ten, but they’d been dating since his divorce—since before his divorce, probably. She was nice enough, but she usually tried too hard.

“Jodi, baby! Paige said you were here.” She pulled Jodi into a tight hug. “I brought one of Katherine’s suits downstairs for you, too.”

Jodi looked down to find the eldest Thrasher sibling's two-piece swimsuit in Charity's hand, and her throat went dry in panic.

"No, ah—thank you, no, but I can't really—"

"Jodi, baby." Charity leaned into her, and Jodi could smell the mimosas on her breath. "You'll only have this body once. Flaunt it!" She squeezed her shoulder and raised her voice. "Besides, Julian doesn't mind if it's a little tight, do you?"

Jodi was hot all over when Julian paddled his inflatable duck back around with a curious expression. "Not—at—all," he said slowly.

Charity pointed her to the pool house and gave her a shove. Jodi trudged inside to the bathroom and laid the swimsuit out next to the sink, glaring down at the offensive neon green pieces. Katherine Thrasher wasn't as small as Lucy and Paige, but she definitely could wear a two-piece when Jodi could not. *Should* not, more accurately.

She pinched her eyes shut and pulled on the bikini. The bottoms barely covered her backside, and the top had fluttery fabric on the front that she would have made fun of in the Target aisle. She stomped her way out the door, refusing to look in the full-length mirror, and sprayed herself down with sticky sunscreen. She returned to the pool to find Julian doing laps and Paige now in the inflatable duck. Dropping into one of the pool chairs, Jodi tried to find a way to sit that didn't show too much thigh and settled in to scroll her phone while Julian went back and forth in front of her.

"Jodi's in a swimsuit?"

Her head whipped to the back door as Lucy slid it open. She was in a bikini top and denim shorts. Jodi felt on display, too seen.

"Charity forced it on me," Jodi said.

Lucy already had a glass bottle of Coke in her hand—her favorite drink in the world. Not Coke in a can. Not Coke in plastic. The Coke bottles from Mexico only. The Thrashers kept their fridge stocked with it for whenever Lucy came over.

"You look hot," Lucy said, setting her drink on the table next to Jodi's chair.

"Thanks." Jodi refrained from covering up her stomach, as Lucy stripped out of her jean shorts to reveal her polka-dot bikini underneath.

"Hey, I have to show you something." Lucy thumbed through her apps before turning her phone to face Jodi. "One of Reagan's acolytes was there

on Friday night. They recorded it all and sent it to her.” Reagan Matthews was Lucy’s mortal enemy. They used to be friends in eighth grade, but now they tried to ruin each other at any opportunity.

Jodi saw herself on the screen, trailing behind Zack and the cop. The video caught them being loaded into the back of the cruiser. The caption read *oh how the mighty have fallen*. It had twenty thousand views. Jodi sighed and rubbed her brow.

“It’s okay,” Lucy said softly. “It’ll be old news soon.” She placed a warm hand on Jodi’s calf, and Jodi smiled weakly at her.

She glanced at Paige before asking, “Did you get any weird texts on Friday? I got one from an unknown number. It just said ‘are you having a nice summer?’”

Paige looked at Jodi from behind her sunglasses.

Julian appeared in front of them at the pool edge. “Wow. Extremely threatening.”

Jodi ignored him. “Maybe it’s nothing, but it was right before the cops came.”

Lucy stood. “I delete spam texts as soon as they come in, but I’ll watch for weird ones.” She held up her phone. “I’m gonna show the video to Greg, in case it’s useful.”

Jodi watched her walk back into the house and wondered if she should tell them about running into Maureen Mills. Normally, she would have texted the group chat immediately, but what they could and could not put in writing was still a gray area. Did Greg Thrasher need to know that Detective Harding had Emily’s journal? Or was she jumping to conclusions?

Her thoughts were abruptly halted when Julian pulled himself up onto the cement in front of her, even though there was a pool ladder ten feet away. Jodi frowned at the flexing muscles in his torso. He stood before her chair and shook his hair out, making sure to send water her way.

“You wanna get wet, Dillon?”

She narrowed her eyes at the dumb innuendo.

He brought a hand to his eyes and winced dramatically. “I’ve never seen this much of your skin. It’s blinding.”

Bringing her arms up to cover her stomach, Jodi clenched her jaw. “What do you want?”

He sat on the edge of her lounge chair. “Do you wanna swim?”

“No.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in the pool.” He flashed her a grin. “Come on.” Her phone was ripped from her hand and tossed into the grass. Before she could blink, two wet arms wrapped around her middle and lifted her clean off the lounge chair.

“Julian!” she squawked, but then she was upside down over his shoulder.

She saw the water. Her muscles locked in fear, and then she was midair, free-falling toward the deep end. She screamed all the way down until the sound of it disappeared and only the slosh was in her ears.

Her limbs froze. Her hair billowed forward around her face as her body sank down, down. The sun sparkled millions of miles away, breaking through the water like crystals, and she knew that was the surface—she did. She knew she could kick up to it.

But how was she supposed to get there with lead on her bones and water in her lungs?

The sun winked at her. Its rays spun outward like golden hair on a girl’s head. The sky was pale blue, like a pair of eyes.

## Chapter Five

*“How did your mom die?”*

*Jodi’s fingers froze on the microscope. Her eyes snapped to Emily. She was twisting her golden hair around one finger, watching her. Jodi turned to the next table wondering if she’d been loud enough for others to hear.*

*Oliver Burns looked away, turning his back on them. Jodi’s neck and cheeks burned hot.*

*“Emily, that’s really personal. I don’t think we’re close enough for...”*  
*Jodi swallowed. “I’d rather not talk about it.”*

*She changed the slide under the microscope and reached for her notes. A small cold hand dropped on her wrist. She looked up to Emily’s pale blue eyes.*

*“You can tell me.”*

★ ★ ★

A sharp stab of air pierced her lungs. Bright sunlight refracted through her wet lashes.

“You don’t know how to swim? Jesus,” a voice panted, inches away.

Waves slapped against her neck, threatening to choke her. She blinked quickly, coming back to her body, remembering she was in water.

Julian was holding her up against the side of the pool in the deep end. Jodi scrambled to grab the ledge behind her. He pushed his hair out of his eyes and stared at her like she was a mutant.

“Jodi, are you okay?” Paige was sliding out of the duck, splashing toward them.

“I don’t like to swim. I told you not to throw me—”

“*Can* you swim?”

Jodi closed her eyes against the sight of Julian’s hazel ones judging her. She turned into the ledge, crawling along the wall like a three-year-old wearing arm floaties.

“What’s going on?” Zack said, coming out of the house with Lucy.

“Julian threw her in the pool.” Paige reached for her on the other side of the ladder. Jodi inched closer, her breathing coming in quick pants.

“What the fuck, Julian,” Zack said. “You know she doesn’t swim.”

“I didn’t! She’s always such a downer, so—”

“Hey!”

Jodi ignored them as her feet found purchase on the ladder steps. Lucy was there with a fluffy towel when she came out, leading her away from the water’s edge.

Her breath was shaking and she could still feel the water swallowing her. Jodi toweled off and walked away from the group, heading inside to the pool house again.

She felt so useless. All she wanted to do was get out of a swimsuit that didn’t fit her and go crawl into bed.

She was just pulling her shirt back on when she heard the pool house door slide open. She poked her head out of the bathroom and saw Zack sitting on the back of the couch with a tight smile on his face.

“I’m fine,” she said quickly.

“Yeah.” Zack nodded. “I sent Julian home.”

She stopped in the doorway. “You did?”

“I told him he’s gotta leave you alone about stuff. He said he really didn’t know you couldn’t swim, but I called bullshit on that. Everyone knows you don’t swim.”

Jodi wrapped her arms around her stomach, still feeling the chill of the water all over her. “Okay. Thanks.”

She didn’t want to talk about the pool or Julian. She didn’t want to remember that everyone had just seen her on the verge of tears in a *bikini* of all things.

Zack picked up the remote from the arm of the couch. “*Stranger Things?*” His deep blue eyes gazed at her from underneath wiggling eyebrows.

Warmth bubbled in her stomach, and something like relief spread through her veins. That was so *Zack*. To read her mind, to know when to detour. She smiled.

“Don’t you want to swim with the girls?”

“Nah, I’m good here,” he said, slipping down the couch and burrowing into the plush cushions.

Jodi sat next to him, and Zack pulled the throw blanket around her, when he saw her still shivering. He grinned at her, and her chest felt tight with how much she wanted him. How much she wanted him to put his arm around her and tug her into his side.

A few hours later, Paige and Lucy came in, made popcorn, and watched the end of season four with them.

It was a perfect day.

★ ★ ★

During the weekdays, Zack was in summer school, meaning that the group didn’t have the glue that kept their social calendar together. That was fine by Jodi. The longer she could go without seeing Julian Hollister, the better.

She went with Lucy and Paige to the opening of some *Real Housewives* boutique store downtown, but could do nothing but browse when she saw the price tags.

“So, for my birthday,” Paige started, as they walked with frozen yogurt down J Street, “I’m thinking 1920s. Flapper girls and mob bosses. It’s on a Friday this year which is *perfect*.”

Jodi felt her heart sink. “But ... the vigil is that day.”

Paige turned to her, spoon in mid-air. “The ninth? Are you freaking kidding me?” she sighed exasperatedly. “Maybe we’ll do the Saturday?”

“I don’t think we should do anything big,” Lucy said suddenly. “I’m sorry, I know it’s your eighteenth, but any kind of party you throw around that date is going to look ugly.”

Paige simmered. Jodi watched her consider her options, then said, “Maybe we could do something privately, just the five of us?”

“No pictures though.” Lucy stopped at the crosswalk and turned to Paige. “No one can see us celebrating on the night Emily’s family is holding a vigil.”

“Well, duh.” Paige tossed the rest of her fro-yo in the trash can. “I just ... This sucks.”

“Why don’t we plan something small on the day, and then we can have a party once school starts?” Jodi offered. “What about a small dinner after the vigil?”

“After?” Lucy turned to her. “You’re going to the vigil?”

“Yeah,” said Jodi, frowning. “You aren’t?”

Lucy pursed her lips. Paige’s gaze was distant.

“You don’t think we should be there?” Jodi tried again.

“I just don’t think ... we’d be wanted.” Lucy shrugged. “You should go. The Millses love you. But the rest of us...” The walk signal flashed, and she stepped into the street. “I don’t think the Thrashers should attend.”

“I disagree.” Jodi pumped her legs to keep up with the two tall girls. “I think it will send a message if we *aren’t* there.”

The truth was, the Thrashers had a reputation for not caring. Zack was nice to everyone. But *too* nice. It meant that people like Emily Mills, like Zack’s homecoming date last year, like his biology partner from sophomore year—they all thought they meant something to him when his attention was turned on them. After a few movie outings or study sessions, Zack moved on. It was usually Julian or Paige’s job to deal with the aftermath if the person didn’t get the memo. Paige took care of things kindly, and Julian took care of things directly.

There was a word for it. The rest of the school had decided on it freshman year when one of Zack’s “new friends” got ghosted and went emo all over TikTok.

It was called being *Thrashed*. That’s what the Thrashers did. Get too close, and you’ll get Thrashed. Jodi had heard that word a lot during finals week, as Emily Mills’s suicide hung over the school like a thick fog.

On the day of Emily's vigil, Jodi pulled on her one black dress and grabbed her bike from the garage. Her dad was out of town, and no one else was planning to go, so her bike it was. She'd texted Zack outside of the group chat earlier that day and told him she planned to leave for the vigil at 6:45, if he wanted to join her.

She hadn't heard back. It was his last day of summer school, but still. She knew better than to ask Paige to join on her birthday. They all had tentative plans to watch movies at her house later.

Clicking the button to close the garage door, Jodi wheeled her bike out to find a humid Sacramento evening. She tossed her hair up and reached for her helmet, just as the front door of the Burnses' house slammed shut.

Oliver slunk down the driveway to his beat-up car parked in front of the Dillon home. He'd dyed his hair black this week, but the blue seemed to shimmer through in the sun. He lifted his eyes to her when her helmet buckle clicked into place.

"Hi," she tried.

He said nothing back. As he rounded the car to the driver's side, she noticed he was in all black, too. No logos. No ripped jeans. He started his car, rolling down all the windows and adjusting his music.

She kicked her leg over her bike, preparing for a sweaty bike ride, when the passenger door of Oliver's car was pushed open from the inside. She blinked at it, wondering if he could possibly be offering her a ride after all these years of silence, and then met his eyes in his rearview mirror.

Jodi dismounted, pulled her bike around to the side of the house, and turned back to the street just as a black Mustang pulled up in front. Zack rolled down the window with a grin.

"Sorry. I failed chemistry. Again. So my phone got taken away. Again."

She rolled her eyes, about to tease him for failing chemistry three times in one year, when the sound of a car door closing jarred her. She looked over to see Oliver Burns squealing away, his car pattering out of sight.

"You gonna walk?" Zack said, drawing her focus back.

She shook her head and jumped into the air-conditioned Mustang.

"I'm glad you want to come," she said as she buckled.

"Yeah, I guess I just ... I didn't want to hide, but I didn't want to make it about me."

"We don't have to climb the bleachers. We can stay below."

He flashed her a grin. “Thanks. That’d be nice.” He ran a hand through his hair. Unlike Julian, Zack didn’t use product, so there was nothing to muss. “There’s so many people I haven’t seen since last year, you know? So, like, saying ‘Hey, how was your summer?’ feels wrong.”

“That’s fine. I’ll probably try to see the Millses, but you don’t have to come.”

He nodded, chewing on his bottom lip as he turned onto the main boulevard.

“So, how did you manage to fail chemistry three times?”

He groaned and rolled his shoulders back. “I have no idea. How does anyone pass that class?”

“I know you have ‘the Peter Kim’,” she said. “First-class tutor—”

“*The* Peter Kim. The one and only,” he said, joining the bit.

“The man, the myth, the legend.” Jodi bit back a smile. “But if you want more help, let me know. I didn’t get an A but I did okay.”

“What would Peter say about tutor interference?” Zack put on his blinker and shook his head in mock disbelief.

“If he would just give you a Kinder Bueno for every question you got right, you’d be golden.”

“Is that how you’d tutor me?” Zack smiled. “You’d train me like a dog?”

“Yeah, I’d tutor you like a dog,” Jodi said. “You get walkies and a belly rub for passing grades.”

“Belly rubs?” He looked over at her and wiggled his eyebrows. “I’m in.”

She laughed and let the AC blast away the evening heat.

When they pulled into the student parking lot, it was already half full. Zack parked behind a large truck, effectively hiding his very recognizable car.

As they walked over to the bleachers, heads turned and hands came up to cup whispering mouths.

Zack could remember small details about every acquaintance, bring up random facts they told him years ago, and turn the Thrasher smile on them without losing any steam. But, although he bumped fists with a few guys on the basketball team, waved at some girls in their class, and said hello to his math teacher, everything felt off.

A news crew was set up at the entrance to the field, the camera guy filming the students filing in. Jodi shivered. She hadn't expected Sacramento news to still be covering Emily's story.

They ducked left around the back of the bleachers, weaving through the crisscrossed bars to their favorite spot: underneath the accessible seating area that was always kept clear. It was where Julian liked to smoke weed during Lucy's track meets. It had a clear view of the field while being entirely hidden by a mesh netting.

Zack jumped up, grabbing the bottom of the highest bench seat he could reach and hung, kicking his legs. Jodi tore her eyes off the muscles popping in his arms and the shirt riding up his stomach and focused on the small stage that was set up in the field.

A projector lit up a white screen with Emily's blue eyes and wide teeth. Mr. and Mrs. Mills sat off to one side with Principal Robbins. Jodi's eyes fell on the person sitting next to Emily's parents and her breath faltered.

Hannah Mills was small and pale, a perfect replica of her sister, right down to her shoes. Jodi couldn't tell from the distance, but those orange Converse might even have been Emily's. She wore her hair in a braid on her shoulder—the only difference between the two of them. Emily had never done anything with her wavy hair, letting it hang limply.

"The paper said Hannah found her."

She turned sharply to Zack and found him staring through the bleacher slats to where the Millses were sitting.

"I know. It's really sad," she said. *Really sad*. No shit.

Jodi began to turn back, but her gaze caught on the light near the empty pathway around the field. It was flickering, almost struggling to stay on.

Emily had had a thing for lampposts. Maybe not a *thing*, but a quirk. She told them about it one night when Lucy was driving them all home after the movies. None of them knew how Emily had been invited—they just assumed that Zack had told her to come. But Paige found out later that Zack had talked about it in front of Emily, that was all. Not even in front of her, adjacent to her. Emily had shown up on her own, acting like she'd been included.

On the drive home, it was just Jodi, Paige, Lucy, and Emily in the car, but it had felt to Jodi like an entire team of investigative reporters had followed them inside the Jeep. Emily wanted to know everything. Favorite

colors, favorite classes, who was dating whom, how long they'd known each other, what colleges they wanted.

During a rare moment of silence at a stoplight, the streetlamp over the crosswalk had flared and gone out.

"Oh! That was me!" Emily had said. "I turn off streetlamps!"

Lucy had turned around in the driver's seat and drily said, "You what?"

"It's like a kinetic energy thing I heard about on a talk show. When I get close to a streetlight, it flickers."

Jodi had exchanged glances with Paige. But it had kept happening when Emily was with them. On the football field, in a parking lot, or stopped at the red light near Emily's street. Jodi wondered if she would have noticed at all if Emily hadn't been obsessed with it. Maybe certain lamps just flicker due to the electric current or something.

Like this one, next to the pathway around the bleachers.

Principal Robbins stood at exactly 7:00 P.M. and tapped the mic. Jodi took a deep breath.

"We're here to mourn the loss of one of our own. Emily Mills was a sweet girl. She would have been entering her junior year next week. Her mother tells me that she was looking forward to applying to both Azusa and Vanguard and hoped to study theology."

Jodi snorted. "Um, no? She wanted to go into political science, like Paige."

When Zack didn't respond, she looked over at him. His eyes were glued to Principal Robbins. Jodi refocused.

"She excelled in science and math and was always willing to help out a friend with their homework. But before we say more about our friend Emily," Principal Robbins said, "Emily's sister, Hannah, put together a slideshow for us tonight."

She nodded at the guy running sound and lights and took her seat.

"Oh god, no," a voice said from behind them. Jodi spun. Lucy had snuck up on them, Paige just behind her. "Tell me there's not a slideshow."

"You guys came."

"Zack said you were set on going." Lucy shrugged.

Jodi moved to Paige as the lights around the field dimmed. "Happy birthday. I'm glad you're here."

Paige smiled back, but it looked like more of a grimace. Over her shoulder, Jodi found Julian a little distance away, vaping and texting.

She rolled her eyes and turned back toward the baby pictures of Emily on the screen. Emily and Hannah playing dolls. Emily in church. Emily's first day of high school at Sac High, before she transferred to New Helvetia for sophomore year. Throughout, Zack's gaze was riveted.

Jodi looked at the people in the stands she could make out from this angle and found some bored faces staring down at their phones. Reagan Matthews was sitting in the front, tears streaming down her face.

She knew for a fact that Reagan had no idea who Emily Mills was until the Monday after she died. Jodi was the one to answer her when she'd asked, "Emma Miller? Did I have a class with her?"

The slideshow music slowed to a conclusion, and on the screen flashed one more image.

Emily and Jodi, smiling at the camera.

Narrowing her eyes, Jodi took a step up to the bars of the bleachers, as if getting closer would help. When was that taken? It looked like a selfie, the camera flash bright in Jodi's eyes. Emily's head leaned on Jodi's shoulder.

"Isn't that at Lucy's cabin last year?" Paige stepped up next to her. "I did your hair like that."

Jodi stared. The earrings. She'd lost one during that trip and never wore them again.

Emily wasn't *there*.

Jodi's eyes snapped to Hannah, wondering why she would edit together a picture that didn't exist.

"I guess maybe..." Jodi paused. "If there were no pictures of Emily with friends for the slideshow. It would make sense to edit one. For her parents."

"No. It's creepy, Jodi," Lucy said. "That little girl is just as creepy as her sister."

Mr. Mills took the microphone then, thanking everyone for their kind words, and said a prayer. She knew he was very active with their church.

"I didn't realize we were a Catholic school," Julian mumbled from a distance. Jodi pressed her lips together.

Zack's head was leaned against a metal pole, still watching the stage.

Just as Mr. Mills took his seat again, Jodi spotted a familiar figure standing to the side of the bleachers near the faculty. Her stern ponytail and crisp suit would have given her away, but it was that red lipstick that had Jodi standing straighter.

Detective Harding was here.

She was scanning the crowd, her eyes quick and catlike. Holding a large coffee in one hand, she looked like she had just dropped in, not quite a part of this.

Before Jodi could mention Detective Harding to the others, Principal Robbins took the mic again.

“The faculty of New Helvetia and I are at a loss for words. Emily was much loved among the teachers, and we know she was just as beloved among our students.”

Lucy snorted.

“I intend to make a solemn promise tonight,” Principal Robbins continued. “The toxicity at this school has to end.”

Zack tilted his head, leaning forward onto a bleacher pole.

“My staff and I will be monitoring the bullying situation at New Helvetia much more carefully in light of Emily’s death. We’ve always had zero tolerance here, but clearly what we’re doing isn’t good enough.”

Jodi’s skin felt itchy and tight. Behind her, Paige whispered, “Oh, my god...”

“Anyone caught contributing to the bullying of another student, either in person or online, will be subject to punishment from the administration—possibly expulsion.”

Jodi wanted to ask *Who was bullying Emily?*

But she also didn’t want to hear the answer.

On the screen behind Principal Robbins, her own face beamed over the assembled student body, large and looming. Incriminating. A picture that didn’t even exist because Jodi wouldn’t have taken a photo with Emily like that.

They weren’t really friends.

As Principal Robbins introduced the high school orchestra, which would play one of Emily’s favorite hymns, Jodi heard murmuring behind her. She turned to see Julian on the phone, his eyes flickering wildly to the rest of them.

“We’ll be right there.” He hung up and looked at Zack. “That was your dad. There are cops at your house.”

She felt the air thin between them all. Paige brought a hand to her mouth, her blue eyes wide.

“We have to go.” Julian gestured for them to follow. “Before we’re seen.”

Jodi’s legs were moving, her shoulder bumping into Zack’s arm every few steps.

*Before we’re seen.*

They slithered out from underneath the bleachers, and Jodi’s gaze landed on her own face, broadcasting out over the field as the opening chords of “Abide with Me” trumpeted from the orchestra. She searched for Detective Harding, but she’d vanished.

Paige’s phone rang, and she silenced it quickly before answering. “Mom?” she whispered.

They darted around the empty concessions stand.

“What’s on TV? What do you mean?”

Paige stopped, chewing on her lip and staring at the grass beneath her feet. Jodi paused with her. Mrs. Montgomery’s voice was tinny but clear through the phone: “They say that girl killed herself because of you. All five of you. Criminal harassment, they’re calling it.”

Jodi’s mind stuttered over the words, attempting to piece them together. Her eyes unfocused and her skin was cold. She heard nothing but the wind and a whispered melody.

*I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.*

Lucy ran her hands through her hair. Zack stared blankly at Paige as she promised her mom she’d be home soon and hung up.

Julian spun to Jodi, grabbing her arm. “What did you tell that detective?” His tone was accusatory, like this was somehow *her* fault.

Jodi wrenched out of his grip. “Are you kidding me? What could I possibly have said?”

“We can’t do this here.” Lucy tugged Jodi’s other arm toward the parking lot, but Julian dragged her back.

“What did you say about Zack specifically?”

“I didn’t say anything, but”—suddenly Mrs. Mills’s words came to her —“Emily’s mom said she didn’t want to see Zack.”

Julian locked eyes with Zack over her head, his expression filled with something unreadable—irritation? Fear?

Jodi turned over her shoulder and watched Zack tug at his hair, squeezing his eyes closed.

“Let’s get out of here,” Paige said. She marched forward, taking charge and leading them to the parking lot.

Jodi was still trying to decipher the look on Julian’s face when they rounded the final bleacher set and found the news crew.

The five of them halted, like finding a bear in the woods. Julian was the first to move, taking Zack’s elbow and shifting him to his other side. “Don’t look at them,” he whispered, and Zack ducked his head.

They edged to the cars, but a voice called out.

“That’s him! That’s Zack Thrasher.”

Light blinded her as Jodi tried to look over. It was more than just one news crew. At least three cameras turned on them, their bulbs bright as sunlight.

Julian and Zack kept walking. Lucy took Jodi’s arm.

“Zack! How would you like to respond to the allegations—”

“Did you tell Emily to kill herself?”

“Over here!”

“Zack, are you sorry she’s dead?”

Lucy tugged her to the right as Zack and Julian continued to Zack’s car. She looked over her shoulder as Julian moved to the driver’s side, but there was a camera still following Lucy, Paige, and her.

“How long have you girls known Zack Thrasher? Which one of you is dating him?”

Ripping her keys from her pocket, Lucy turned Jodi and Paige sharply through two tightly parked cars to lose the camera crew.

Paige started running, and Lucy and Jodi jogged to catch up. Lucy beeped open her Jeep, and Paige was inside and buckled before Jodi even got her door open. Lucy squealed out of the parking lot just as the camera caught up to them. The light beamed into the back seat, whiting out Jodi’s vision. Paige panted in the front seat, hyperventilating.

Barely five minutes later, the car veered into the Thrashers’ driveway, speeding down toward the red and blue swirling lights.

Julian and Zack were joining Greg Thrasher and two officers on the porch. Lucy shut off the engine, and Jodi stepped out just in time to see Zack turn around, hanging his head as one of the officers pulled cuffs from his pocket. The click of the cuffs was drowned out under: “Zackary Thrasher, you’re under arrest for the harassment and statutory rape of Emily Mills.”

Case No. 4512420

Excerpt from the journal of Emily Mills

Entered into evidence 6.08.2024 by Det. Chelsea Harding

**AUG. 21, 2023**

**I DON'T THINK THERE EVER WAS A BOY AS PERFECT AS ZACK THRASHER. I WANT TO WRITE POETRY ABOUT HIM. REALLY BAD POETRY THAT I'LL NEVER SHOW ANYONE (ESPECIALLY HIM) BUT I WANT TO WRITE IT ANYWAYS. I WANT TO USE METAPHORS TO PERFECTLY CAPTURE THE SHADE OF BLUE IN HIS EYES, AND THE TEXTURE OF HIS HAIR. I DON'T THINK HE STYLES IT. IT'S JUST ... PERFECT.**

**I SAID ON MONDAY THAT MY FIRST DAY AT MY NEW HIGH SCHOOL WAS OFF TO A ROUGH START, BUT NOW I KNOW MY LOCKER IS JUST ACROSS THE HALL FROM ZACK'S.**

**EVERYBODY KNOWS HIM. PEOPLE STOP TO ASK HIS OPINION ON STUPID THINGS LIKE NEW KINGS PLAYERS OR THE SHAWN MENDES RUMORS. TODAY SOMEBODY WAS TELLING HIM A STORY ABOUT A PARTY IN TAHOE OVER THE SUMMER, AND ZACK STOOD THERE AND LISTENED TO THE WHOLE BORING THING EVEN AFTER THE BELL RANG.**

**I WANT HIM TO LISTEN TO ME LIKE THAT. LOOK AT ME LIKE THAT. LIKE I MATTER. LIKE WHAT I HAVE TO SAY MATTERS.**

**BUT HE HAS GIRLS AROUND HIM ALL THE TIME. BEAUTIFUL GIRLS. THREE OF THEM. I GUESS THEY'RE CALLED THE THRASHERS. SOMEONE SAID IT'S BECAUSE THEY TRADE OFF SLEEPING WITH HIM, BUT THEN I ASKED IF HE'S HAVING SEX WITH THE OTHER DUDE THRASHER, AND I WATCHED THEIR THEORY FALL APART IN REAL TIME. I DON'T THINK ZACK WOULD HAVE SEX WITH A LOT OF PEOPLE. HE'S NOT A PLAYER LIKE THAT. AND A FEW OF THE GIRLS DON'T LOOK LIKE THE SHARING TYPE.**

***I TRIED TO ASK HOW SOMEONE BECOMES A THRASHER.  
THEY SAID, "YOU DON'T."***

## Chapter Six

*Zack was eighteen.*

That was all that Jodi could think of as Charity Thrasher gave her a cup of French roast and assured the four of them that Zack wouldn't spend the night in jail.

"If Greg can get a judge to set bail tonight, he'll be home in a flash. Don't you worry." She squeezed Paige's shoulder and handed her a cup of cocoa with a slab of whipped cream on top. An unlit birthday candle was stuck in the center of it.

From her spot next to Paige at the kitchen island, Jodi glanced at Lucy in the living room, standing next to the couch and flipping news channels back and forth to find the reports that Mrs. Montgomery had called Paige about.

*"New information in the Emily Mills suicide. Several of her classmates have been accused of 'bullying her to death.' The five friends reportedly took Emily into their circle, and then maliciously cast her out—"*

The channel switched.

*"—going by the nickname 'the Thrashers,' this clique of five is facing scrutiny as more reports come forward about their bullying and harassment of Emily Mills, and one of them is facing statutory rape charges—"*

Footage of the five of them escaping from the vigil played on the next channel. Jodi watched herself run behind Paige and Lucy.

She needed to call her dad.

"Did Zack have sex with Emily?" a soft voice asked.

Her head snapped to Paige, who was watching her with watery eyes, waiting for an answer.

“You’re asking *me*?” Jodi said.

“I don’t think he would have told all of us, you know? It would have been a really shitty thing to do to someone like Emily.” Paige paused and glanced up at Jodi. “Unless he actually liked her.”

Jodi blinked, forcing her mind to think about it.

The five of them didn’t talk about sex as a group. Maybe it had to do with the mix of girls and guys, or maybe because three of them had a crush on Zack. Or maybe—Jodi feared—they all considered her a prude, so they talked about it without her. Maybe they thought she’d be judgmental. When Zack had lost his virginity to Lucy in the middle of sophomore year, Jodi hadn’t taken it well. She knew Paige was upset and jealous, too, but she’d hid it better. Jodi didn’t know how to sit with Zack and Lucy at lunch and pretend it hadn’t happened, so she didn’t. She didn’t see any of them for a week. She’d been panicking, hurt that the boy she was in love with had sex with someone else, and afraid that their group would change with it. Lucy had claimed she was “over it” and “moved on” a few months later, but Jodi saw the way she still looked at him. She’d dug herself a grave by being too casual about it. Zack had moved on as well.

She was the only inexperienced one among them, and Julian wouldn’t let her forget it.

Glancing over to where he sat in the dark outside, feet hanging into the pool, she said to Paige, “If anyone would know, it’s Julian. Zack doesn’t tell me about that stuff.”

“I don’t think he did,” Paige rushed to say, “but I just wondered if he told you anything ... or if you saw anything.”

“I can’t imagine Zack actually having sex with her.” She jerked her hands away from her coffee cup. “Um, that’s not to say she wasn’t pretty —”

“Yeah. Totally. Of course.”

Jodi nodded, then reached for her coffee again. She thought about how much Zack thrived on respect and attention, and how Emily gave him those things in high doses.

She shook her head and stood from her chair. “I have to call my dad.”

Slipping out of the kitchen, Jodi rounded the corner into the guest bathroom. Her dad was the second contact in her Favorites, after Zack.

He was supposed to be on a quick overnight to Nevada, a trailer drop and back. She listened to the phone ring.

“’Ello?”

“Dad. Can you talk?”

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” she said quickly, feeling the opposite of okay. “I’m safe, but there’s a situation here.”

His voice was tense with worry when he said, “I’m two hours away from Spring Valley, but I can turn around—”

“No, don’t do that. It’s not an immediate emergency.” She took a deep breath and turned her back on the mirror over the sink. “You remember the girl at school who died?”

“Your friend Emily?”

She blinked at the hand towels with the monogrammed *T*. “Yeah. Well, there’s an investigation into why she killed herself. And they think we bullied her.”

He was quiet for a moment. “Bullied her? You were her only friends.”

Her eyes squeezed shut. “Yeah,” she said weakly. “But they think we did. And ... they think Zack had sex with her. And since he’s eighteen, they’re calling it statutory.”

“Where are you?” It sounded like the engine cut out.

“Don’t worry. I’m at the Thrasher home with the others. They—they arrested Zack, so Greg is trying to post bail.”

“Jesus...”

“I know. I’m okay though. I just wanted you to hear it from me. We’re on the news.”

“Rosa called, but I ignored it.” Her mother’s sister was somehow always first to know.

“Okay, I’ll text her.”

“Try to stay with someone tonight, alright? I’ll hurry home but probably not until dawn.”

“That’s fine. Drive safe.”

When Jodi hung up, she texted Aunt Rosa and let her know she was safe and not in trouble. She left the bathroom and went back to the kitchen just

as Julian came in from the backyard.

He was looking down at his phone. “Okay, so it looks like there’s not a lot they could have on us, despite all this press. If they were to go for criminal harassment, it would be hard to land.”

Lucy stood from the couch and met Julian at the kitchen island. Paige sipped her cocoa with a distant look in her eye.

“What do you mean?” Jodi asked. “What would make it ‘easy?’”

“Well, if we’d done anything physical to Emily, like they’re accusing Zack of.” He glanced at Lucy. “And they’d probably need eyewitnesses.”

Paige shook her head. “But we didn’t. We didn’t *do* anything.” She looked between Julian and Lucy, waiting for them to agree.

Car lights splashed onto the walls of the dining room, and all four of them looked. Jodi held her breath. Was it the cops? Were they here for each of them now?

A key turned in the lock.

“Hey, everybody,” Greg Thrasher said from the front door, his voice tired and rough.

Jodi darted to the hallway, Paige and Lucy hot on her heels. Zack was closing the front door, his eyes bloodshot and his nice black dress shirt untucked and wrinkled. Greg dropped his hand on his son’s shoulder and said to all of them, “Let’s talk.”

He gestured for them to enter the large dining room where Jodi had joined the Thrashers for dinner on more than one Thanksgiving. Greg hugged his wife before following them in, taking the chair next to Zack. Jodi and Lucy mirrored them, and Charity and Paige sat at the heads of the table. Julian leaned against the wall with his arms crossed.

“I’ve been in contact with Cheryl,” Greg said, nodding at Paige, “but have the rest of you called your parents?”

Jodi and Lucy nodded. Greg looked to Julian. He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “They’re in Paris.”

Julian hesitated, and Charity offered, “I can call Nina. They’ll be awake in a few hours.” It seemed like Julian was about to decline, but he just nodded tightly, looking at the floor.

If Jodi’s dad won the award for “Least Involved,” then Julian’s dad was runner-up, but in Ray Hollister’s case, it was more to do with indifference, Jodi thought.

Greg turned his eyes back on the whole group.

“The DA seems to think they have enough evidence to charge Zack for criminal harassment and statutory rape,” he said in his lawyer voice.

Lucy shifted next to her, pulling her hands into her lap and then placing them back on the table.

“What evidence?” Charity asked, voice thin.

“Zack has told me that he has no idea what they have on him,” Greg said. “He did not have sex with Emily. He did not harass her physically or verbally.”

Jodi’s eyes slid to Zack. His gaze was concentrated down on the table runner. His bottom lip wobbled, and he bit down on it.

Before Greg could continue, Jodi cut him off. “There’s a journal.”

Six pairs of eyes looked at her. She glanced at Zack before continuing.

“I ran into Maureen Mills at the grocery store, and she mentioned things I had no memory of—things she learned about in a journal.”

“So it’s Zack’s word against a journal’s? Seriously?” Lucy sat back, running a hand through her hair.

“What was in the journal that she mentioned?” Greg asked her.

Jodi sat forward. “All she said was that Emily tried to kill herself in April, and that I convinced her not to.”

“Did you?” Greg’s eyes bore into her.

Jodi felt like she was under a microscope, like she was back at the police station with Detective Harding. “Definitely not.”

Greg tapped his fingers on the table.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Paige said softly.

Jodi turned to her. “I didn’t—I mean, it’s not true, so I didn’t think...” She looked at Zack for help, but he was looking at his hands on the table.

“Can they really press charges based on a journal?” Julian asked.

“No. You can’t cross-examine a journal. They’d need more evidence. So they think they have it.” Greg cleared his throat. “They may think they have evidence on all of you.”

A chilled silence fell over the table. Jodi’s mind worked quickly. So, Harding had the journal before the police took them in for questioning, but they didn’t arrest Zack that night, which means they got more evidence since then.

Paige's voice broke through the tense quiet. "How will we know if they have evidence? Will they arrest us?"

"Not necessarily. I think Zack's arrest tonight was for show. They wanted it announced before the vigil. They wanted to get you all on camera, and they got it."

Jodi thought back to Detective Harding scanning the crowd tonight. The news crews covering a vigil for a girl who'd been dead over three months. There was something about the smirk on Harding's face when Greg came to pick up Zack that night at the police station. This was personal to her. This was a game.

"There's nothing in the public record on you four right now," Greg continued, "but once it's entered, you may receive notice about a hearing." He rolled his shoulders back and lowered his voice. "Is there *anything* you can think of that the DA may be using against you? Eyewitness accounts, texts, emails—I know you don't really *email*, but..."

Jodi tried to think. They'd never been cruel to Emily. Did they want her around? No. Did they make that known? Maybe? Lucy had a habit of rolling her eyes whenever Emily joined them at lunch without an invitation, and Julian had started walking away from her whenever she brought up topics that were irrelevant. But never Zack. He nodded and engaged and encouraged her to keep talking.

It was something Paige had warned him about often. *Don't encourage her. Don't make her feel like she'll always have you in her corner.*

Jodi glanced around the table. Paige was bouncing her knee and chewing on her cheek. Zack's elbows were on the table, his head dropped into his palms. Lucy was looking straight ahead at Greg.

"We didn't like her," Julian finally said. "We talked about it. Maybe someone heard, or saw texts, or *took a fucking hint* because we were dropping them all over, and *still* that girl didn't get it."

"Did anyone ever get physical with her in *any* way?" Greg said. "Throwing things, tripping her, stealing books—"

"This isn't the '80s, Dad," Zack said, the first words he'd said all night. "We don't knock books out of people's hands anymore."

"Online?" Greg continued. "Do you have chat rooms or ... I don't know, *forums* where you would be using aggressive speech with her or about her?"

Between Discord, TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram, and even X, there were a lot of places where it could have happened, but Jodi couldn't think of anything.

"How can we find out what they have on us?" Lucy asked.

"You can't. Not unless they want you to know about it." Greg took a deep breath. "Okay, here's my suggestion. And I say this as a lawyer and as Zack's dad. Get your parents involved. Get a lawyer involved. If you get called in for an arraignment, you're going to want a lawyer ready."

Jodi saw dollar signs. She rubbed her palm.

"My next piece of advice—and I know you're not going to like it. It's time to un-clique. Zack told me what Principal Robbins said tonight. Expulsion. Cracking down on bullying." Greg cleared his throat. "I'm aware that you all hold a lot of power at that school, but this is not the time to show off. The news is already calling you the Thrashers. This is going to spread through Sacramento fast. The last thing you want to do is to return to school this Monday as a group."

"What do you mean?" Paige asked, her brows drawn in concern.

"I mean, it's time to make some new friends. Sure, you all can hang out, just not as a group. Split up your class schedules. Invite more people with you when you do things." He leveled a direct stare at each of them and said, "But do *not* continue to exist as the Thrashers while the DA's office is investigating you as bullies and criminals."

"Dad. It's our senior year." Zack pulled his head from his hands and looked over at him.

"No, he's right," Julian said, his expression unreadable. "We need to split up. No more than two of us seen hanging out at a time."

Jodi felt dark clouds rumbling over her horizon. Splitting up for the five of them usually resulted in Paige and Lucy on one side of the line and Zack and Julian on the other, with Jodi as the floater. If they made "teams of two," Jodi wasn't sure she'd ever get picked.

"Does this go on his record? The arrest?" Julian asked.

Jodi's attention snapped back to Greg as he nodded.

"Will that affect college?" she asked.

"It will if this spins out of control. It'll affect all of you."

Lucy cracked her neck, and Paige wiped a tear off her cheek as inconspicuously as possible.

“Yeah, okay.” Zack sniffed. “Whatever.”

Jodi’s chest ached for him. He looked like he just wanted to go to bed.

“I’ll call tomorrow and change my schedule,” Lucy said. “I have a few classes with Reagan I’d like to get out of anyway.”

“We won’t meet under the bleachers on Thursdays anymore,” Julian said. “And we should cancel our trip to Tahoe on Labor Day.”

“Why?” Paige said. “Can’t we just ... hang out without pictures?” She looked as scared as Jodi felt. “Why can’t the five of us just ... be discreet?”

Jodi watched her chin wobble and wondered how Paige Montgomery, who had friends in every class, five extracurricular projects a semester, an entire dance team in another town that she saw on weekends—how Paige could be that afraid of being lonely. Then Jodi remembered the wild way her eyes searched for help on the street outside Burr’s, how she said she couldn’t breathe, how she felt she was being watched. Maybe it wasn’t being lonely she was afraid of. Maybe it was being *alone*.

Lucy stood. “No, this is right. We have to make changes.” Her voice was firm, and Paige seemed to nod her acceptance. “I have to get home and talk to my dad,” Lucy said. “My uncle is a defense attorney.”

Julian and Paige followed her into the kitchen to get their things.

“Jodi, do you need a ride?” Greg asked.

She thought of her empty house and the millions of notifications on her phone about tonight’s vigil.

“She can stay, right?” Zack asked. “We can take her home in the morning?” His eyes were red-rimmed.

Greg agreed and left the dining room to make up a guest room for her. Jodi smiled softly at him from across the table, and then went into the kitchen.

Zack said his goodbyes to everyone else from the doorway, and Jodi rinsed the dishes and loaded the dishwasher, swallowing back the lump in her throat.

She heard footsteps behind her and turned to see Zack leaning on the kitchen island. She wiped her hands and faced him.

His mouth was open, like he had words to say if only his throat would move. A harsh sigh fell out of him.

“I’m sorry,” he said, sniffing. He pressed his palms into his eyes and slapped his face awake. “I’m sorry about all of this. I should have listened

to you all when you said not to be nice to her.”

Jodi’s breath caught in her chest, but still she asked, “Did you sleep with Emily?”

He shook his head, eyes crinkling in pain. His voice choked out the word, “No.” Then he was reaching for her, burying his face in her neck. His breath was hot on her skin and his arms were tight on her ribs.

She held him as he cried, hoping this moment could be worth all the things she was sure to miss as her life broke into pieces.

## Chapter Seven

At seven in the morning, Hank Dillon trundled down the Thrashers' drive in the Corolla. Jodi stood from the window seat and sent Zack a text to say goodbye and to call if he needed anything. She slid into the passenger seat, buckled, and let her dad wring every answer out of her.

That morning, her dad called a friend from high school who was a lawyer, but not a criminal one. He gave them both some peace of mind on what they could expect over the next few days.

"Just the media, if anything," he assured them on speakerphone. "If cops come to the door, call a lawyer immediately, but if they didn't have anything on Jodi last night, they don't have it. She's a minor. They won't want to make this messy."

Jodi cooked eggs for the two of them while Hank took notes.

She didn't hear from the others all day. Paige sent a picture of her cat to their Snapchat group in the afternoon, but Zack was silent. Probably grounded because he failed chemistry and therefore being watched carefully by Greg.

On Sunday night, she pulled Monday's clothes out of her closet. A jean jacket Lucy had bought her, Skechers from Zack, a necklace from Paige. She could feel like her friends were with her in small ways.

Hank made tacos for dinner, and it was almost nice how rattled he was about it all—he'd forgone drinking to oblivion, sticking with a can of Bud and nothing else.

At bedtime, Jodi stared at her empty notifications before asking Lucy in the Snapchat group if she got her schedule changed.

ya i have english with julian still, but i changed everything else

no drama with you jo. Sorry

Jodi stared at the phone. She didn't even *want* to take drama class. Paige did. Then Paige needed Model UN, so it was only Jodi and Lucy. Now it was just Jodi.

She'd have to drop it tomorrow. There was no way she was getting left behind only to end up playing a tree.

★ ★ ★

The moment Jodi stepped on the bus Monday morning, she decided to ride her bike for the rest of the year.

There were rows upon rows of classmates staring at her, some lifting cool, assessing brows. Jodi realized most of them had seen her face on the news three nights ago.

She inched to the back, passing full seats and finally dropping into an open aisle next to a kid with a lip ring and large headphones.

She'd been stared at before, mainly in jealousy or—what Jodi assumed was—confusion. *How did she end up a Thrasher?*

But this felt different.

The bus rumbled to a stop at school and she let herself be jostled off, pouring out into the warm morning. She wound through the crowd to the locker she'd had for three years. Paige had had the one just next to hers since sophomore year, but when Jodi twisted the combination and unlatched, a pink note fell out.

**I had my locker changed. ☹ see you in English**

Jodi stared down at it. Paige's precise but flowery letters looked out of place. She crumpled the note and stuffed it into her pocket.

*Everything* seemed out of place. It was like a nightmare version of senior year. She had never aimed to be "popular." It wasn't her entire goal like it was for the kids in high school movies. Maybe it would be more accurate to say that she aimed to *stay* popular, but really, she just aimed to stay with Zack, to be needed or wanted. It wasn't until walking into Señora Barnett's class that she saw the flaw in all that.

Jodi hadn't needed to make new friends. Ever. Sure, she met Lucy and Paige freshman year and had to get to know them, but that was all Zack.

The last person Jodi befriended had killed herself on prom night.

As she took a seat near the window, she realized she knew everybody in this class, but she wasn't sure she actually *knew* anybody. If Zack were here, he could whisper to her information he'd retained over the years, like maybe why Michaela and Tom V. looked like they'd broken up, or ask Naomi when she'd gotten her braces off. But if Jodi were to ask Naomi about her braces, she'd probably say she got them off two years ago, *thanks for noticing*.

When Jodi walked into English, Paige was already seated in the front, chatting with the people in the desks around her. She gave Jodi a warm smile, but didn't stop her conversation.

After class, Paige was waiting for her outside the door, and Jodi almost jumped in surprise.

"Hi, babe! First day okay?" Paige offered her a stick of gum. Jodi shook her head. "I'm going to find a nice, out-of-the-way space for Zack and me to have lunch. He's had a really rough day so far. A lot of stares and whispers, you know. So, I'm going to be with him, but tomorrow, we can sit under the tree on the field if you want!"

Paige was gone before Jodi could respond, swept up in the crowd heading to the cafeteria.

Tugging a granola bar out of her backpack, Jodi fought against the current and headed to the front office to change her class schedule.

Miss Tamblen, the receptionist, was on the phone at the front, so Jodi bit into her bar and chewed while she waited. Her eyes flickered over the inboxes, the freshmen welcome packets, and corkboard that stated merrily, *Welcome Back!*

"Jodi, what's up?"

She snapped her gaze back to Miss Tamblen and found her hanging up, grinning at her.

"Hi, I wanted to switch out of my fifth period class. It's an elective, and I just wanted to see what else I could take."

"Ooookay," Miss Tamblen typed her name into the system and rearranged her computer glasses back on her nose.

Oliver Burns drifted out of the side office, carrying a stack of freshly stapled packets that he laid with the other freshmen materials. His hair was yellow now.

“Oh, drama? Are you sure? New Helvetia’s department is very good,” Miss Tamblen hedged.

Oliver snorted, and she hushed him with a snap of her fingers.

“Let me check with Mrs. Yaris.” Miss Tamblen stood, and moved toward the back of the office.

Jodi watched Oliver as he filled binders with a flourish, tucked pamphlets into front sleeves, and hole-punched with grace.

“Are you taking an office assistant semester?” she asked.

He only nodded at the binder he was working on.

She shifted her weight and picked up a flyer for Back-to-School Night. Not that her dad would go ...

“Why did you sign up in the first place?”

He was still staring down at the binders, clicking and unclicking the rings. She wasn’t even sure he was truly speaking to her.

“Paige and Lucy wanted to. And now they both had to drop.”

He didn’t react to her. She was just about to apologize for answering a question that wasn’t even posed to her when he said, “It’s not that bad.”

She blinked. “Sorry?”

“Drama. The program is so small that the stage crew has to sign up for the same period. Mrs. Calloway asks on the first day if you’re a stage kid or a crew kid, and crew kids are only forced to do one-liners and ensemble stuff.”

“So I wouldn’t have to play a boy?” She grinned.

“Maybe. But you also could work in the shop all semester.”

He pulled his cell phone from his pocket, and at first, she thought he’d lost interest in her as he flipped through pictures. But then he extended his phone to her and lifted his eyes for the first time.

“Did you see *The Miracle Worker* last year?”

She shook her head.

“This was the backdrop.”

She took his phone and stared at a painting of a blurred white house with green shutters. A tree branch curved over the top, like a picture frame.

“You worked on this?”

He nodded. "It's mine. I do the backdrop and wigs for every show." He took his phone back and shrugged. "We always need artists." He grabbed the binders and disappeared into the side office.

Jodi stared after him. They hadn't had a proper conversation since eighth grade. They used to be good friends, and she wasn't sure what changed back then, but he'd reached out today. She thought of her schedule for the next semester. She'd never seen Oliver on any of the posters for the shows or forced into tights for *Romeo and Juliet*. Could she actually get away with just painting?

In comparison to the rest of her days full of lonely classes and no further after-school hangouts with her friends, it sounded pretty nice.

"Right," she said, as Miss Tamblen returned to the front. "I think I'll actually stick with drama."

"Wonderful!" Clapping her hands, she bounced on her heels. "You know, Mrs. Calloway is *such* a professional. She was on the West End!"

Jodi waved and headed to the vending machine near the cafeteria to grab a soda and a bag of chips, planning to eat them in the bathroom before heading to art.



Mrs. Calloway was a terrifying individual of flowing skirts and long, beaded necklaces. Her jewelry clicked when she walked, and her cerulean eyes lit up when she saw Jodi.

"Jodi Dillon. Where have you been hiding all this time?" Her lips were purple and perpetually tilted upward.

Jodi gave her a shrug and accepted the syllabus handed to her, but Oliver had been right. She allowed the crew kids to break off and go find Doug in the production lab before any of the vocal warm-ups or ball-of-energy work began.

Doug was a stocky man in his fifties who needed to step out for a cigarette every fifteen minutes. He showed them the stage and some basic safety precautions and then broke them up into stagehands, wardrobe, and scenic designers. He didn't learn their names.

Jodi tried not to hover at Oliver's elbow the whole time. Just because he talked to her once didn't mean they were friends again. But when Doug sent them over to their workstations, Oliver took charge of the scenic design team and told them all that Jodi would be working on the backdrop with him.

After drama, Jodi started down the hall to advanced art, unsurprised to see Oliver a few steps ahead of her, walking with an Asian girl in Doc Martens, overalls shorts, and purple-highlighted hair.

"I told her I'll gladly join stage crew if I'm only going to be a part of the Greek chorus again. She can fuck off if she thinks I'm wasting another year chanting '*No, Antigone, no!*'" She flipped her purple-black hair over her shoulder and walked through the classroom door when Oliver pulled it open for her. Jodi slipped through when he gestured for her to enter next.

"That's Nikita," he said, like that was all the introduction necessary. Like *NIKITA* would be in lights one day.

At the end of the day, as she headed to the bus stop, Jodi realized that she had English with Paige and anatomy with Julian (where he hadn't spared her a glance), and that was it. She had no classes with Zack or Lucy. If they weren't supposed to eat lunch together ... when would Jodi even see them?

On the way out of the main gates, a news crew had set up near the brick wall. Standing next to a reporter was Reagan, about to be interviewed. Jodi paused. She glared at Reagan, wondering what she could possibly say about the girl she didn't know.

"Emily was such a *treasure*. I'm just *heartbroken* that she's gone."

The reporter asked, "A lot has been said about bullying at this school. Did you see Emily bullied?"

"Absolutely. They're called 'the Thrashers.'" Reagan's eyes flicked to Jodi with a satisfied smile.

Jodi turned on her heel and booked it through the parking lot. She knew Reagan hated Lucy, but Jodi wouldn't have said she hated all five of them. She was standoffish, but not cruel.

By the time Jodi reached the bus stop, the bus had arrived. Plopping down in the first seat available, Jodi put in her AirPods and scrolled through her music. Her eyes drifted up, and she lost her breath in a *whoosh*.

Emily Mills was standing at the front of the bus, looking for a seat. She stepped forward, and Jodi felt her heart jolt. Her eyes unfocused, and it was like she was staring at Emily from underwater.

But her hair ... was different. Her eyes a bit closer together. Younger. The specter locked eyes with Jodi, moving down the aisle as if on a track. It wasn't Emily. It was Hannah.

When she passed her, Jodi could only think one thing as she stared forward, swallowing down the bile climbing up her throat: Hannah Mills had taken her sister's orange shoes, orange backpack, and favorite blue shirt—but even dead, Emily Mills was more vivacious and alive than her sister. Hannah was the ghost.

Jodi rode the bus until her stop, then slithered out of the seat, stumbled down the steps, and once the bus was out of sight, she heaved into the first set of bushes she found.

## Chapter Eight

It was Thursday when her homeroom teacher handed her a note from the new wellness counselor, Ms. George.

***Jodi, I'd love to meet with you during your free period this week. Come by any time.***

Jodi stared down at the fluttery letters, her pulse jumping. There was only one thing a counselor would be interested in talking about.

She took her time getting there. Oliver was behind the desk in the office, glaring into space as someone talked his ear off on the office phone. Jodi tapped the counter to get his attention and pointed to the hallway where the guidance offices were.

Oliver's lips twitched as she started down the hall. "So, you want an interview with one of the so-called Thrashers, is that right, sir?"

Jodi stopped, turning on her heel to face him.

"Oh, do *I* know them? Sure, I do." Oliver grinned, and she scowled back. "They're *very* popular. Unfortunately, we have a new policy about the media due to recent events. I'm sure you understand."

He shooed her like a fly while he listened to the reporter argue his case. Jodi continued down the hall, looking at nameplates until she found *Roseanne George*. The door was closed, and voices were coming from inside. Jodi sat down in a chair by the wall and scrolled her phone until the handle turned.

"—sure it's all going to turn out okay. I'm glad you could stop by."

Jodi looked up and froze when she met Hannah Mills's blue eyes. Hannah seemed surprised to see her, but then quickly recovered. "Hi," she said, and then Jodi was engulfed in a loose hug. She didn't breathe, in case a small movement could break Hannah's fragile arms. Just as quickly as it happened, Hannah was darting down the hall, head down. Jodi stared after her, speechless. She had *never* hugged Hannah Mills in her life.

"Hi, are you waiting for me?"

Jodi jumped and turned to the woman who must be Ms. George. She was in her thirties with brown curly hair and large, thick-framed glasses.

She found her voice. "Yes. Jodi Dillon."

"Oh, Jodi!" Ms. George's pleased smile brightened as she glanced down the hall where the front door was just closing after a girl with orange sneakers. "Hannah was just talking about you."

"Excuse me?" Her heart pounded.

"She says you're her only friend at school so far." Ms. George winked. "That's very kind of you to keep an eye on her."

Jodi simply nodded and waited for Ms. George to step aside before she entered.

"I'm so glad you decided to stop by," she said.

"I wasn't aware it was optional." Jodi's eyes bugged out when she saw the state of the counselor's office. Boxes in corners, filing cabinets exploding with paperwork.

"Oh, well, I sent notes to each of you, but you're the only one who's come by so far."

"Each of who?"

"Your friends. The Thr—oh, I suppose you don't like being lumped together like that. Interesting that you're named after one person."

"It wasn't really our choice. The rest of the school decided on it."

"Interesting!" Her brown eyes lit up like it was, in fact, interesting. "And how long have they been calling the group of you by that name?"

She gathered some loose pages on her desk, stuffed them into an open folder, and closed it. Jodi saw *Mills, Hannah '28* on the side.

"Was there a reason you called me in?" Jodi said, trying to reroute the conversation. Her stomach twisted as she wondered why Hannah had been talking about her at all.

“I wanted to check in. It’s a lot to handle—the media, your friend’s arrest. Tell me how that’s going.”

Jodi felt Ms. George’s eyes digging under her skin. In all her time at New Helvetia High, she’d never had a counselor check on her like this, and she wondered what the catch was. “It’s been hard,” Jodi said carefully. “Everyone has kind of turned on us.”

Ms. George began what she clearly thought was a comforting speech. Jodi’s eyes glazed over and came to rest just beyond her. On the floor in the corner sat a box, taped shut. *Emily Mills* was written on the side.

“What’s that?”

Ms. George stopped mid-sentence and turned her head. “Emily’s files. The detectives are coming by today to pick them up.”

A cold chill crept down her spine. “And you’re going to share *my* file with the police, too, I guess?” Jodi said, voice harsh.

Ms. George’s eyebrows drew together in alarm. “Whoa, whoa. Not at all. Jodi, anything you say in this office is kept confidential, except if you are intending to hurt yourself or others.”

Jodi’s breath quickened. “So you just invite Emily Mills’s accused murderers into your office for a chat on the day the police are swinging by?”

Ms. George leaned forward, bracing her elbows on the desk and lowering her voice. “Jodi, unless I missed something, no one is accusing *anyone* of murder. I wasn’t aware that you were implicated in any way. I only thought your friend Zack was charged.”

Jodi blinked at her, willing her heart to rest.

She tilted her head. “Does it feel like you’re being accused of murder? Is someone at school making you feel that way?”

Jodi pressed her thumb into her palm. Maybe she was overreacting. But maybe Ms. George didn’t know a fucking thing about this school and Emily Mills. Her eyes glanced at the box in the corner—the box that may contain hard evidence against Zack. Against all of them.

She needed to read that file before it left this office.

Mustering everything Paige had ever taught her about getting out of speeding tickets, Jodi forced her face to crumple and brought a hand to cover her eyes.

“Oh, Jodi...”

She heard Ms. George moving across the office to locate a Kleenex box. Once her back was turned, Jodi drew her phone out of her pocket and, with nimble fingers, opened a new text thread to a contact she hadn't used in years.

**could u get george out of her office? i need 5 min**

She hit send, and just before Ms. George turned back around, she added:

**this is jodi**

"Here, sweetheart." A Kleenex appeared under her chin, and Jodi slipped her phone between her thigh and the seat.

"It just sucks," she said, staring down at her hands. "The news says we bullied her to death, and the school believes it, too."

"I heard that you were friends with Emily. Was there bullying involved?"

Jodi looked up. Ms. George's head was tilted sympathetically.

"We didn't bully her," she said truthfully. "We didn't really *like* having her around all the time, but we didn't go as far as telling her to kill herself."

Ms. George nodded encouragingly. Jodi was surprised to feel ... almost better, saying it out loud. Like a balloon, filled so close to popping, had finally released a hiss of air. She wondered how easy it would be to just open her mouth and let it all fall out—all of her frustrations that her friends didn't prioritize her, all of her regrets about Emily, all of her love for Zack. But she sniffed into the Kleenex instead and refocused on her task.

Jodi didn't feel her phone vibrate, so she needed to do something about that box herself. She could come back, maybe skip next period. She could text Julian about the box. He would definitely break in if he knew about the file—

There was a knock on the door before it opened. Jodi spun around.

"Ms. George?" Oliver Burns poked his head in. "Sorry! I forgot you had someone."

Jodi's heart jumped.

"Yes, I'll be done in just a bit—"

"Sorry, it's just that—you have a Kia, right? Tan?"

Ms. George paused, surprised. "Uh, yes."

"I got a report that there's broken glass around a tan Kia in the parking lot and I was going to go check it out before calling the cops."

“Oh my god.” Ms. George jumped up, knocking over a pile. “Um, sorry. Jodi, can you wait here? You’re very important,” she threw over her shoulder as she sped out of the office. Oliver lifted a brow before leaving Jodi alone, closing the door.

Jodi’s heart was pounding as she sprang out of her chair. Her fingers pried at the top of the box, but it was taped down. After a second’s hesitation, she reached for the nearby scissors and slit across the tape in an even line, right under the lip of the top. As long as she could put everything back, no one would suspect it had been opened.

Inside she saw a mass of loose paperwork. Flying through progress reports and end-of-semester grades, Jodi found notes with the previous wellness counselor Mrs. Needlemeier’s header at the top.

**Florence Needlemeier, Wellness Counselor**

***January 19, 2024***

***Emily Mills—Soph***

NOTES:

***Mrs. Huberman found Emily crying between classes, brought her in. Would not talk about why she was crying. Agreed to see me next Friday for a check-in.***

January 19 meant nothing to Jodi. But then again, a lot of this would mean nothing to her. She was tempted to find the notes from the session Needlemeier mentioned, but maybe it was more important to look for Zack’s name directly.

Her fingers fluttered over the pages, pulling back corners and roving quickly over words. She soon discovered that Emily kept Friday appointments with Needlemeier going.

***Emily has new friends. Zackary Thrasher, Lucy Reed, etc. Was excited to talk about them. Asked her about last week’s fight with dad, she quickly changed the subject.***

Jodi resisted the urge to flip backward to find out about Emily’s fight with her father. She needed to find out what the police would soon know.

Maureen Mills's words about April rang between her ears, and she thumbed through until the first Friday in April.

***Talked about Paige Montgomery's spring break plans. I asked if she was joining Paige in Hawaii. Emily said she hadn't been invited—yet.***

Her brows shot upward. Why *the fuck* would Emily assume Paige was going to invite her to Hawaii? Jodi hadn't even been invited. It was a family trip that only included Lucy.

At the bottom of the page, Mrs. Needlemeier scribbled in the corner:

***Follow up about Jodi Dillon***

Her eyes stuttered over her name. She flipped to the following Friday. No mention of herself. What was Needlemeier supposed to follow up on?

There was sweat under her arms. She knew she didn't have enough time. Jodi flipped to the final Friday in April, after spring break.

***Conversation focused on schoolwork. No mention of Zack Thrasher today—odd. Jodi Dillon is her best friend. I told her to try reading Jodi's body language, look for visual cues, see if Jodi feels the same. Said Jodi was the only person who cared about her in the entire world. Wouldn't elaborate.***

Without taking a moment to think about anything, Jodi pulled up the last page of notes in May.

***Emily going to prom with the Thrasher group. Paige M. invited her in the limo and Zack said he'd slow dance with her. Jodi wearing a blue-green dress like a mermaid. Very excitable. Julian H. said he'd order a corsage for her to match the girls.***

***Said she's "a Thrasher now." I asked if that was a good thing.***

***Obsessive. Angry when prodded about this.***

Jodi's brows jumped. None of it was true, except for Jodi's dress color. This was damning. If the police believed this account, it would look like

Jodi and her friends had set Emily up. Her fingers were shaking, and her blood was pounding in her ears as she listened carefully for footsteps.

Jodi ripped the page from the box. She scanned her eyes down it. Was this the only place Mrs. Needlemeier called Emily obsessive and angry? Was she shooting herself in the foot if the police didn't see that assessment?

She couldn't care. She folded the page four times and stuffed it in her back pocket. The box lid slid over the top easily, and Jodi sat back in her chair, pulling out her phone to look casual.

A text from Oliver read: **walking back from lot now.**

Her eyes locked on the box. What else could she find out in the handful of seconds she had? Emily's fight with her dad in February? More about prom? Whatever Emily had said about her that needed "following up"? Would there be an explanation of how Jodi had supposedly talked Emily out of killing herself in April?

Her knee bounced. Opening the box again would be time-consuming and tricky. Suddenly, she remembered Hannah in here just ten minutes ago. The hug she gave Jodi on the way out the door.

Hannah Mills's file was still on the desk. Jodi jumped to her feet. She flipped backward through the file, finding Hannah's middle school transcript, a request to test out of freshman computer science, and a note about Hannah not finishing her summer reading. Jodi stopped short when she found a photocopied page.

Sacramento Police Department  
Incident Report  
Date: May 11, 2024  
Case No. 4512420

Response to 911 call at 633 35th Street. Caller reported murder, on-site shows suicide. Caller identified as Maureen Mills, mother to deceased Emily Mills, 16.

Why did Hannah Mills's file include a copy of the police report? Her eyes flew over the typed text, finding a section highlighted in yellow on page two.

Sister to deceased discovered body. Hannah Mills, age 13. Interviewed with father present. Hannah tried knocking on shared bathroom door with no response from Emily. Around 9:35p. Opened door appr. 10 min later to find Emily Mills in bathtub, unconscious. Called for parents immediately.

I examined Emily Mills and found her without a pulse, body warm. I tried lifesaving measures ...

Chills crested down her arms. Her mind filled out the scene, building the report around her as she read on. She could see Emily in the bathtub. She could see the paramedics. She felt herself out of her body. Jodi shook her head, coming back to present.

Miscellaneous information: Found in pink formal dress. Dress and body were damp. Did not assess leaking faucets in bathtub at time of inspection. No explanation for the water.

She heard footsteps. She closed up the folder, replaced it carefully on the desk, and stared into space with a bored expression as the door opened.

“I’m so sorry about that, Jodi! It ended up being a false alarm, thank god.”

Ms. George looked winded, and Jodi hoped her father’s Irish coloring wasn’t pulling blood into her face as she returned her smile.

“It’s okay. Um, I actually need to go grab lunch, but this was really nice, Ms. George. Could I maybe come see you again sometime?”

The older woman’s face broke out into a surprised grin. “Of course! I would love to spend more time with you.”

“Thanks. Well, good to meet you.”

Ms. George moved to the side and let her out of the office. Jodi tugged the back of her shirt down over her backside, hoping the outline of the folded session notes wasn’t obvious.

Oliver gave her a cool glance as he picked up a phone call. She nodded at him, and continued to the art building.

Her heart was fluttering in her chest. She tried to make sense of a few things. She supposed the guidance office having a copy of the police report made a kind of sense, seeing as Hannah had found a dead body three months ago.

*Dress and body were damp.* What did that mean? And was any of what was in Mrs. Needlemeier’s notes true? Had Paige invited Emily just to humiliate her? That wasn’t like Paige.

Had Julian offered to get her a corsage, knowing Emily wasn’t invited with them? That *did* sound like Julian.

Had Zack promised to slow dance with Emily? A possibility, but not to torment Emily.

The air-conditioning blasted across her face as she entered the building for her next class. She'd need to ask Paige about it to make sure.

But one question circled in her mind.

Had she just derailed a police investigation?

## Chapter Nine

Jodi went with her dad to see a moderately priced criminal defense lawyer on Friday after school. Miranda Perez was a thin woman with intense eyes and black curls peppered with gray. Jodi told her everything she knew—aside from the stolen page of Needlemeier’s notes hidden in her bottom dresser drawer—and her dad agreed to set up the three-thousand-dollar retainer.

It was a quiet car ride home. Jodi knew that money wouldn’t just appear. It was going to be taken from somewhere else, and that somewhere was her meager college fund.

She sent Paige a Snapchat video that would automatically delete after being watched, asking if Paige thought she’d ever accidentally invited Emily in the limo. Paige sent back her own.

“No, definitely not,” Paige said, filming herself in the car, sunglasses on and focused on the road. “In hindsight, I really should have said, ‘Emily. Girl. You are not coming.’ But I tried so hard not to talk about that limo when she was around. As for Zack telling her he’d slow dance with her?” Paige put on her blinker and took a heavy breath. “Honestly, maybe? He’s terrible. I love him, but he’s oblivious.”

Jodi agreed. There was nothing Zack would have done cruelly. He didn’t like humiliating people. With Emily and the other classmates that had been Thrashed, he never laughed at them directly. He thought Emily’s oddness had been funny, but he hadn’t *made fun* of it. Zack was always ready for a practical joke, but never one at someone’s expense.

She texted him to ask how his first week went, and he got back to her after eight, which meant that Greg was keeping his phone hostage until after dinner now.

**Weird. I cant tell whos being nice and whos just digging for gossip.**

She tried to ask him about his class schedule, hoping to find a few breaks to meet him, but he didn't respond. She even tried texting the group chat about how their weeks had been, but she got minimal responses there. It seemed like Jodi had instigated every Snap, every DM, every Discord thread. She felt too annoying, too clingy. She felt ... she almost felt like Emily. Like no one wanted her around, but they were tolerating her.

On the second Friday of the semester, with her mind on her first anatomy quiz later that day, she sat under the oak tree, snacking on her crackers and jotting down her answers on the path of blood through the body. A shadow crossed her sunlight.

"Hey."

Zack looked like an angel, with a halo of light around his head, sent to save her from loneliness. She beamed up at him as he kicked her shoe.

"How's it going?"

He shrugged and slid his hands in his pockets. "It's pretty awful."

"Same." She closed her book and moved her backpack so he could sit. "How's Chemistry: Round 4?"

He cursed under his breath, folding himself to sit next to her. "The first three weeks are always good. It's once the word *covalent* comes up that I completely lose it, so Peter has me working a few weeks ahead of the syllabus this time around."

She knocked his shoulder. "You know, if your dad just donated the money he's spending on your tutors to the school, he could buy your passing grades."

"I literally told him that. I said, 'I can find someone to take the SATs for me if you're paying this much.'" He rubbed a hand down his face. "But you know Greg. That wasn't funny to him."

Jodi hummed and offered him a Ritz. He spun it between his fingers instead of eating it.

"I haven't seen you," Zack said, his fingernails chipping away the salt flakes.

"I think that's the point. We're not supposed to."

“He meant not all five of us at once.” Zack broke the cracker in half. “Not that we have to spread ourselves across campus.”

“Yeah, well, no one has been rushing to pick me for dodgeball this week.”

“Me neither.”

Jodi cast an *Oh, really?* look at him.

“Seriously,” Zack said. “Paige ate lunch with me the first two days. Julian drove with me to school twice this week. But I’ve had to meet new people for lunch every day, and it feels off, you know?” He glanced at her, and she nodded. “Like they want to talk to me, but for a different reason than before. I haven’t heard from Lucy since last Sunday. Paige says she’s been tiptoeing around Reagan, but I don’t know.”

She felt her heart sink. “I’m sorry. I thought ... I thought everyone paired up without me.”

“Me too.” He pressed his lips together and looked out over the field. “I thought you were distancing yourself.”

“I’ve been miserable. I’ve been eating lunch with Oliver Burns and Nikita.”

He puffed out a laugh. “Who’s Nikita?”

“Oh, you’ll see. She’s going to be famous one day—just ask her.”

They smiled together and sat quietly for a bit. Then Jodi took out her phone and opened their group chat. “Do you have tutoring tonight?”

“Yeah, but I’m done at six. Dad’s in Modesto for a case.”

“Perfect.”

She typed to the five of them: **Drive in tonight? we wont be seen by anyone if we stay in the car**

Zack hummed next to her and typed back the movie reel emoji. Lucy was quick to send back the eyes emojis. Then she saw him flip open the Fandango app. He chuckled.

“What’s playing?” she asked.

“Oh, man. You’re gonna hate it. I can’t wait.”

She tried to lean in to see his phone screen, but he jerked his arm back. He grinned down at her, and Jodi was close enough to count his eyelashes. She felt her pulse flutter as she fought the instinct to glance at his lips. Zack’s eyes seemed to soften, the glee still there, but directed at her, not the movie choice.

The bell rang from across the field, and Jodi pulled away, calming her heart.

Zack jumped up and held out his hand for her, and Jodi relished the contact. It had been two weeks since he'd hugged her in his kitchen as he cried. She wasn't sure anyone else would have gotten that vulnerability from him, but *she* had. She wanted him to need her like that again.

"I gotta get my book from my locker, but I'll see you tonight!" Zack said over his shoulder as he left.

Jodi waved and watched him jog across the field, wondering if she could get those five minutes with him every day.

By the time anatomy was over, Julian was the only one who hadn't responded about the drive-in plan. She approached his workstation as he zipped up his backpack.

"You coming tonight?" she asked.

He curled his lips like she was something sour. "It's a stupid idea, Dillon. You honestly think no one else is going to be at the movies on a Friday night?"

"The *drive-in*. We'll be in the car—"

"Am I not allowed to get food? Or piss?"

She glowered at him. "I'll bring an empty water bottle for you."

"You wanna see my dick that bad?" He lifted a brow.

She'd forgotten how nice her life had been without Julian Hollister swatting at her like a fly. Jogging after him, she caught his elbow just outside the door.

"Come on, Julian. You've been just as lonely these two weeks as the rest of us. No one else tolerates you."

He leaned into her. "Do you see me eating lunch by myself, Dillon?"

She felt her cheeks heat. Julian swiveled on his heel and strode away.

But when Paige and Lucy picked her up at seven that night, Julian was already on his way with Zack.

There was a system they'd used for years. They'd meet at the Denny's two blocks from the drive-in, hide three of them in the truck bed, and then only pay for two tickets at the cashier. Jodi didn't know why four of the wealthiest kids she knew did this. Maybe it was just for the thrill of it, but either way, it was only three bucks each for the five of them to spend a night getting high or drunk or just eating Red Vines until Lucy puked.

They pulled into the Denny's lot and parked next to Julian's black truck. The smoke from his pipe was already curling up and out of the windows.

She watched as Zack got out and swept Lucy up into his arms. "I haven't seen you in so long," he said into her curls. Jodi looked away, straightening her shirt and trying not to think of the simple kick to her shoe *she'd* received upon seeing Zack for the first time in two weeks.

Paige made them wait while she went inside and ordered a milkshake for her and a bunch of fries for the group. While Paige was inside, Lucy hopped up on the truck bed and answered questions about Reagan.

"Every time I enter French, she's leaning into someone, whispering, and then she shuts up. Obviously spreading shit. And I saw her talking to the news crew last Monday, but I couldn't find any stations that played her." Lucy sighed and ran a hand through her hair. "I don't know what she wants from me. She didn't give a fuck about Emily Mills, so what kind of clout is she trying to get?"

"She saw an opening, and she took it," Julian said, leaning forward on the side of the truck and stretching out his calves. "If you're out of the way, she has a chance at starting position volleyball, nationals in the spring, homecoming court..."

Jodi snorted. "You think Reagan Matthews wants homecoming queen bad enough to lie to news cameras?"

Julian tilted his head at her with a slippery smile. "Says the only one of us who'll never be nominated."

She flinched.

"Hey." Zack stepped forward.

"You want homecoming queen, Julian?" Lucy cooed. "I'll put in a good word."

Julian shook out his shoulders and walked around to the front of the truck, done with them.

"What is his deal?" Lucy reached out her hand, and Jodi stepped into her.

"He's had a rough week," Zack said weakly. "It's no excuse for being a dick, but—"

"I got my arraignment papers yesterday." Julian's voice carried to them from the other side of the truck. Jodi and Lucy snapped their heads toward him. "That's right. Ya boy's going to jail."

Lucy jumped up and peered down at him. “What? Don’t talk like that. It’s ... It just means that—”

“It means”—Julian reappeared on the other side, walking the parking spot line like a high wire—“that my case was easier to research than the three girls’. Easier to conclude.” His smirk didn’t reach his eyes. “It means that Emily Mills had some *fascinating* things to say about me in her diary.”

Jodi stared at him, her heart beating in fear.

“No,” Lucy said matter-of-factly, “it means the mail in Sacramento is shit, and we’ll get ours tomorrow. Fuck, I haven’t been home. Maybe I already have it.”

Jodi’s mind spun. Her dad was on the road to Denver all weekend. The mail would be on the entryway floor.

Maybe going to the drive-in was a bad idea after all. Julian was right: they shouldn’t be seen hanging out together.

Just then, Paige jogged out of Denny’s, a milkshake in one hand and a to-go box in another. “Let’s do it! Friday night and I got my milkshaaaaake.” She wiggled her hips and growled her words, and it was enough for them to forget Julian’s news for a time.

“Truck or Paige’s car?”

“Truck,” they chorused, and Jodi sighed. Taking the truck to the drive-in meant that she sat up front with Julian. Jodi had lost her shit *once* and cried when Julian sped out of the parking lot while she was in the bed of the truck, and now it was understood that Jodi would not be one of the three in the back anymore. Which meant it was Zack, Paige, and Lucy in the back, rolling around and clutching each other.

Lucy grabbed a six-pack of her Mexican Coke bottles from Paige’s car and placed them in Julian’s truck. Then the three of them climbed in the back and shut the tailgate behind them. They tugged a tarp over themselves, laughing and trying to steal fries from Paige, and Jodi turned to Julian.

“Do you want me to drive?”

He stopped, keys in hand, and raised his brows at her.

“Are you high?” she clarified.

“Not yet.” He tugged open the driver’s door, and Jodi reluctantly followed to the passenger’s side. Julian only let her drive his truck when he was blitzed out of his mind. They’d had a screaming match outside a party last year when she refused to get in the truck after his third beer, and he

refused to let her drive. Zack had to step in and order an Uber for himself and Jodi, letting Julian do whatever he pleased.

Jodi managed to buckle just before the truck zoomed backward. They had only a handful of minutes alone together. Maybe Jodi could get something out of it.

“When is your arraignment scheduled?” she asked him.

Julian reached for the volume knob and blasted the music as they squealed away from the Denny’s parking lot, ending the conversation.

Two minutes later, they pulled into the long line of cars queueing for the ticket booth, and when the car in front of him didn’t pull up, Julian smacked his hand down on the horn.

“Was that necessary?” she said, leaning her elbow out the open window.

He glared straight ahead and then clicked the button to roll up her window. She jerked her arm back inside.

When they pulled up to the ticket booth, a pimply guy a few years older than them passed a cursory glance into the window and said, “Two?”

“Yep.” Julian popped the *p*. “Stephen King double feature.”

Jodi groaned. Zack said she’d hate it, and he was right.

“Starts in a few minutes. Lot 3.” He glanced over at Jodi as he printed the receipt. “Date night?”

Her lip curled. Julian said, “You betcha.”

“Have fun.” He handed over the receipt.

“Doubt it. She’s a virgin.” His grin spread across his face, and the truck squealed forward, heading for Lot 3.

Jodi crossed her arms, a blush crawling up her neck. “You don’t know that,” she bit out.

“I *know* that.”

“You don’t. I haven’t talked to anyone for two weeks. I could be having tons of sex. Skipping class, doing it in the parking lot, in the art supply room—”

“You’re not.”

He slowed for the rocky, unpaved road of the lot, and she chanced a look at him. The corner of his mouth was curled upward. He drove to the front row and flipped around to shine his brights at every car that had gotten there early, pulling in so the truck bed faced the screen.

“You’re an asshole. *This* is inconspicuous?”

He ignored her, finally turning off his lights after a lot of honking, and tuned the dial to the movie audio. Jodi slid out of the truck, throwing apologetic looks to the cars around them. Julian was sticking out a lot. Paige, Zack, and Lucy were tossing the tarp off themselves and laughing about the ride. Jealousy coursed through her, but she buried it as she grabbed the sleeping bag and blankets tucked behind the passenger seat.

“Are there any fries left?”

“Yeah, but they’re soggy.” Paige handed the box over and pulled out a Stanley cup that probably held forty ounces of vodka. Lucy grabbed her pack of glass Coke bottles from the front and started mixing the vodka into them for her and Paige.

Jodi took a handful of limp fries and climbed into the bed of the truck. She hated scary movies, but what she hated even more was being vulnerable while watching them. Tucking herself into the center of the truck, she leaned back on the rear window and grabbed a blanket as the music for *It* started. Paige slid up next to her, and Lucy and Julian left for the bathroom and concession stall, respectively. Zack lit up Julian’s pipe.

“What’s the second one?” she asked Paige.

“*It Chapter Two.*”

“Fuck.”

Paige laughed and wrapped an arm around her. There was a child talking to a sewer grate by the time Lucy got back. She jumped up into the truck with a graceful twirl and leaned back on Paige’s thighs.

“What did you end up changing fourth period to, Jo?” Lucy asked.

“I stuck with drama.”

“Really?” Paige turned to her sharply. “Is it fun?”

“Well, I chose to be on crew. So I’m not gonna be playing Juliet or anything.”

“You should! Damn it, I wanted to take that class,” Paige whined. “Fucking Tunisia.”

Jodi laughed. “Is that your Model UN nation?”

Paige nodded and finished the end of the fries. Zack was fully invested in the movie, watching with a slack jaw as the three of them chatted. Julian returned with only a Diet Coke for him to pour the contents of his flask into.

“So kind of you to offer to grab us something, Julian,” Paige said pointedly. “I *would* have loved some nachos, thank you.”

“You’re very welcome, Paige,” Julian said, hopping up on the truck bed. He sprawled out longways, stretching his legs over the girls’ and leaning back on the side of the truck.

Jodi started a game on her phone to keep her eyes from watching the screen. Lucy and Paige passed the vodka back and forth, while Zack smoked and Julian drank. It was nice to just all be in the same place again. She might not be able to watch the screen, but she would much rather hear Paige complain about AP Calculus and Julian do impressions of the teachers. She’d missed this.

Paige leaned into her after twenty minutes of a terrifying soundtrack and whispered, “I can stop drinking after the first movie if you don’t want to drive my car home.”

“No, I’m good. But can we walk back to Denny’s if Julian is being a dick about it?”

Paige nodded, but Julian spoke up with his eyes on the screen. “I will let you drive the truck to Denny’s if it means you’ll shut up and let me watch the movie.”

“And we’ll sit down and order something to sober you up?” Jodi raised a brow at him.

“Sure.” He wrapped his lips around the straw.

“I can’t wait that long,” Zack said, turning to them with clouded eyes. “Anyone want snacks?”

“Red Vines,” Lucy said immediately.

Paige must have been fighting with her mom again, because she asked for her nachos with extra cheese. Julian was fine with his spiked Diet Coke, but after eyeing his glassy gaze, Jodi asked for a popcorn bucket for them all to share.

Zack waved her off when she offered to go with him, so Jodi stretched out, lying on her stomach facing the screen, but not really seeing it. The angle was better this way for her to ignore the freaking clown and just focus on the game of Yahtzee she was playing against her Aunt Rosa. The music was giving her the chills.

They’d gone to the drive-in with Emily once. In March as soon as the weather turned. Julian drove his truck with Paige and Zack in the bed, and Jodi rode shotgun with Lucy, who threatened to put Emily in the trunk if she couldn’t keep still under the blanket in the back seat.

Jodi didn't remember the movie, because Emily talked the entire time, asking personal questions, burrowing deeper. She wanted to know what concealer Paige used, Lucy's favorite Olivia Rodrigo song, and whether Jodi liked Peanut M&M's or Reese's Pieces. The following week, Emily showed up to school wearing concealer two shades too dark. Her locker was filled with cut-out lyrics from "vampire." Whenever Emily sat down next to Jodi, she whipped out a packet of Peanut M&MS, ripped them open, and said, "Want some?"

Whether Emily ignored Julian because he was also ignoring her, Jodi didn't know. He was just shy of cruel with her—talking over her in conversation, purposefully miscounting to exclude her. He'd been that way to Jodi forever of course, but it was intensified and targeted when Emily was around. Would Jodi say that Julian was bullying Emily? Probably. But Emily was also unable to take a hint.

Something must have happened on the screen, because the people in cars started yelling and laughing. Jodi forced herself not to look, afraid she'd have nightmares for months, and instead her eyes were drawn to the lamppost on the other side of the screen, toward the highway. The bulb flickered to life, then sputtered out. Over and over.

A creak thundered from above. The sound wasn't from the speaker in the truck. She came up on her knees, looking for the source of the sound of wood groaning, a crunching, grating. The film flickered, moving off the screen, up, up. Someone screamed in the distance.

It wasn't the film. It was the screen. Coming forward.

"Jodi!" Paige's scream pierced her ears.

The movie screen was falling forward, headed right for them. She froze, but something warm slammed into her back, sending her down hard on her chin. For a moment there was only screaming and the movie score, breath against her neck as someone pressed her down to the truck bed.

Then the earth rumbled. Glass shattered. Paige was screaming and *where is Lucy* and car alarms blaring.

She tasted metal on her tongue and listened to Julian's heavy groan of pain. It was dark. She could only see the black truck under her. A delayed crunch, and something shattered behind them. Paige was still screaming.

A hundred people were.

Jodi couldn't breathe. Pain throbbed in her ribs, her chin. She turned her head, her eyes wide and searching for anything. The screen was on top of them. Lucy's shoe was two feet to Jodi's left.

"Lucy!"

"We're here. We're fine!" Paige yelled.

"Julian?"

He took a shaking breath against her back. He'd covered her. Was he injured?

"Julian!" she tried more forcefully.

He shifted against her and yelled, "Fuck!"

A *pop!* like a gunshot to her right, and she jumped as the truck bed tilted. The tire had exploded.

"Can you get out?" Lucy's voice shook.

She heard Paige whimpering. The shift of their bodies. Lucy whispering to her to move with her.

Jodi had her phone in her hand still. She opened her flashlight with shaking fingers and laid it facing up, giving them light. She could only tilt her head a tiny bit, but the screen was above, white and vast, angling up to the remains of the cabin of the truck.

The truck creaked, like it would give out and collapse at any second.

"Julian, let's move, okay? Let's get out?"

She felt him nod against her neck. Lucy was shimmying down the truck bed on her belly next to them, cooing softly to Paige.

Jodi shifted out from under Julian's shoulders and was able to turn on her side to him. Behind her, Lucy thumped down onto the dirt. Jodi's mouth was wet. She wiped her arm across her face and it pulled away bloody.

"What hurts?" she asked Julian. "Can you move?"

When he didn't respond, she tilted her flashlight at him. His eyes were squeezed closed. His left shoulder was curved oddly, like a tennis ball was lodged underneath it.

Dislocated.

Paige slid off the truck bed, dismounting with a *thunk* and a sob. Jodi flipped over to them, about to make a plan to get Julian out. She felt dizzy when she saw them.

Blood matted Lucy's hair, dripping down her neck to stain her shirt. She was lifting Paige up off the ground, crouched low under the screen. Paige

hopped up on one foot, her ankle held gingerly in the air.

Lucy and Paige started for an opening out—light shining in from the highway in the distance, between the bottom edge of the screen and the dirt ground. It was about twenty feet away.

“Julian, you got her?”

It took her a moment to realize the “her” was her. “Go,” Jodi said.

She grabbed her phone and held the flashlight up as she slipped down off the truck bed, sliding through something wet.

“Come on. You can do this without a shoulder.”

“I can’t ... can’t breathe,” he gritted out. “Maybe my ribs.”

Jodi knelt in front of him, hissing as the rocky dirt dug into her knees. She dropped her phone on the ground, flashlight up, and reached under his arms. As soon as she started tugging, he screamed against her ear—like nothing she’d heard before.

“Julian—”

“Stop.” He panted. “Leave me. Jaws of Life will come.”

He had his face buried into his good shoulder, refusing to look at her.

She considered it for a heartbeat, crawling out alone and begging anyone nearby to go back for him.

The other tire popped. Jodi jerked, falling on her backside. Julian groaned as the truck tilted, the movie screen creaking above them.

She heard sirens in the distance. Just a little longer.

Jodi turned her flashlight into the truck. Wet, red blood sparkled back at her. Lucy’s? Or was Julian more injured than he thought? There was enough space above his waist for her to get her arms around him.

“Dillon, go.”

“Don’t be a martyr, Julian. It doesn’t suit you.” She climbed up into the bed of the truck. “You can feel your legs and all that, right?”

“Yeah.” He bent a knee. “I can’t use my—my core.”

“Stop talking about your abs, you asshole,” she tried to joke, and she thought she heard a puff of breath in response.

Jodi wrapped her arm around his hips and tugged him sideways, sliding him so his legs could face the end of the bed. He yelled out, and she kept pulling, looking for puncture wounds.

“Jodi!”

They both froze. Zack.

“Julian!”

His voice came from the front, near the opening where Lucy and Paige escaped. The sirens blipped and beeped from their right.

“Go,” Julian said again.

“Jaws of Life won’t be here for like an hour.” She tugged at him again, and his legs fell off the truck. He yelped but dropped his feet to the ground, slipping himself from the bed without using his ribs or shoulder.

Jodi grabbed her phone and shone light toward the opening. It was dark, like maybe the projector had stopped. She could barely see the escape route, but Julian grabbed her flashlight and took her arm. She let her legs follow, feeling like jelly.

Zack met them just as they crawled out, Julian panting in short breaths.

“They’re here!” he yelled over his shoulder.

He reached for her first, but she shook her head. “Julian’s worse.”

Zack reached for him and tugged just in the wrong way, but managed to pull him out.

Jodi was blinking hard, wondering why it was so dark. She swayed. She’d crawled through something wet. Her knee was drenched in it.

A stranger in a white shirt appeared next, reaching for her with a “Miss?” He helped her out, and as soon as she stood up tall, she looked back. The spindly back of the screen, punctured and cracked, hung by a few wooden beams where it was still connected.

The EMT dragged her away, even as she said, “I can walk.” The words were thick.

Julian was sitting on a stretcher to her left, his eyes wide and mystified, fixed on her. He looked like he had seventy questions to ask but only a breath to do so.

Someone was yelling. Zack was next to her as she was lifted on a stretcher. She pointed to Julian.

“Dislocated shoulder. Ribs, too. He says he can’t breathe.”

They didn’t listen to her. There were five people over her, forcing her to lie back. Someone wrapped something around her thigh. She looked down.

The right leg of her jeans was black. No, not black. Red.

A few inches above her knee, a shard of glass as big as her hand stuck out of her like an iceberg in dark water.

Oh.

Jodi lay her head back on the stretcher as they wheeled her to the ambulance. Her head jostled and turned to the left.

The movie was still playing, projected onto the trees behind where the screen used to stand. A streetlamp winked at her. And then went out.

## Chapter Ten

She opened her eyes to a white room. Pale linen curtains billowed against the open windows, and a bird sang on the tree outside. Cool sheets slipped over her thighs as she sat up.

Emily sat at the end of her bed, smiling at her. Too-wide teeth and pale blue eyes.

She reached out a shimmering hand, stretching her fingertips for Jodi's arm.

"I'll protect you."

Her fingertips landed on her skin like a kiss.

And passed through her.

★ ★ ★

Jodi woke in a white room. A curtain to the right, pale blue and unmoving.

The chirp of her heart monitor on her left, and Zack sitting in the chair.

"Hey." He sat forward, smiling. "You're fine. You just passed out."

She furrowed her brow and sat up to look down at her thigh, and bright pain burst into her brain. She hissed through her teeth.

"They had to wait to pull it out at the hospital. Said it was on the femoral artery, so they needed blood before they could take it out."

She nodded and lay back, feeling winded. "Julian?"

"Two broken ribs. Dislocated shoulder."

Taking a deep breath, Jodi pinched her eyes closed. "Water polo?"

"It'll take six weeks," he said.

Her lips pressed together. She didn't know why she was fucking crying about Julian Hollister not getting to play water polo.

"Lucy and Paige?" She opened her eyes and blinked back the tears.

"Paige's ankle is getting looked at now. Probably just a sprain, but they're making sure. Lucy has a concussion. She said her head hit the truck bed in the crash. Nicked her temple open."

Zack's hand was still on her arm, just above the IV. She focused on the warmth of him. "Did you see it?"

His thumb rubbed her wrist, and her skin broke out in goosebumps. She hoped he didn't notice.

"I heard the screaming, and I turned from the concession stand just in time to see the crash."

"Was anyone else hurt? The other people in the cars?"

Zack shook his head, and Jodi looked at him in disbelief. "Remember how Julian parked?" Zack said.

She winced. "Like a dick?"

"A few other cars got debris damage and had their bumpers scraped, but because he was so far up, his truck was the only thing hit."

Jodi stared at him. "That's insane."

He nodded. "They're calling it a freak accident. My dad's already looking into what kind of lawsuit can be filed against the drive-in."

Frowning, Jodi shifted in the bed. She didn't like the idea of the drive-in getting sued because they were too poor to pay for upgrades. Jodi herself had contributed to the less-than-great profits by hiding in a trunk once or twice. But she supposed if the drive-in was negligent, then maybe hospital bills should be covered or something.

The idea of hospital bills and who would be paying them forced Jodi to jerk upright. "My dad."

"He knows. He's in Utah. The best option was to keep driving, because there wasn't going to be a flight out of Salt Lake until tomorrow morning."

She winced—at the pain in her thigh *and* the thought of another money conversation with her dad. He'd already been so frustrated about the lawyer's retainer, barely talking to her when he was home, and when he was, he made comments about them not being able to go out to eat or pay to play golf together. Jodi closed her eyes and rubbed her face with her free hand.

“But he called your aunt. She’s on her way.”

“Oh.”

Rosa and Jodi got along, but Rosa thought her sister, Jodi’s mom, had made a huge mistake by marrying her dad, and she made that known whenever she could.

“Julian’s kinda in shock, by the way.”

She snapped her gaze to him. “Shock?”

“Yeah. I heard him asking the nurses how you wouldn’t have felt the glass, why you would have been so mobile.” Zack laughed. “I think he’s really impressed. He may owe you a life debt or something.”

Jodi scrunched her nose. “Hardly. He could have just laid there for a few hours until the Jaws of Life came.”

Zack swallowed and looked down. “Uh ... Well, Paige was the last one loaded in an ambulance. She said that right after Julian’s ambulance left, a few more beams snapped. The screen collapsed, like, *more*.” He looked up at her. “If he’d still been under there, he might be dead.”

Jodi stared up at the ceiling. “Tell him to buy me a gift card and be done with it.”

Zack laughed. He sat back in his chair, pulling his hand away, and her arm felt colder.

“Is it weird?” he said. “That we were supposed to stay away from each other, and then the one time we all get together, we almost die?”

Jodi chuckled. “I mean, you’re not wrong.” She grinned and turned her head to him.

He was staring off, in serious contemplation.

“It was a freak accident,” she repeated.

He jerked his head and ran a hand through his hair. “Or karma.”

She blinked. Before she could ask him when he began to believe in that, the click of heels on linoleum announced Aunt Rosa’s presence. She threw back the curtains, gasped about how pale Jodi was, and started the discharge process while Zack waved goodbye.

★ ★ ★

Rosa Rodriguez was an intimidating creature. She wore heels, rain or shine, and with her black curls and pristine eyebrows, she often drew every eye in the room at thirty-nine. Every year on her birthday, Jodi received makeup and perfume bottles that made Paige scream in envy.

“That drive-in is so dangerous. I remember how rickety those screens were when *I* was going to them.”

Jodi sat in the front seat of Rosa’s car, her bloody clothes in a bag on the floor and hospital sweatpants from the gift shop on her lower half. The stitches on her thigh would leave a scar, nasty and crooked, six inches long.

Rosa was ranting, and Jodi caught “your father” and settled back in her seat.

“Have you heard from him?” she asked.

“He texted from Reno,” Rosa said, answer short, just like her temper when it came to Jodi’s dad.

She watched Howe and Fair Oaks pass and realized Rosa was taking her to her grandma’s house. Of course. Why would she get to just go home alone? Jodi breathed deep as they navigated through the construction on the J Street bridge.

“Can’t believe he just lets you out with your boyfriend when he’s not in town,” Rosa grumbled.

“I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“You were in a truck with two boys on a Friday night,” she said matter-of-factly.

“They’re friends.”

She clucked her tongue and said, “For now.”

Jodi rolled her eyes. Rosa had never had trouble turning friends into boyfriends. When Jodi was twelve, she sat eagerly at Rosa’s knee and listened to her tell stories about Jodi’s mother and her, how they’d gone out to clubs at fifteen and been invited backstage to rock concerts. Jodi had been looking forward to it. But instead of her aunt’s breasts, she got her thighs. Instead of her mother’s hips, she got her father’s stomach.

Her grandma’s house was a sweet two-bedroom in River Park, a buried little neighborhood on the other side of the college campus. Rosa parked in the driveway and led her up to the house.

“Grandma is sleeping,” she said, opening the front door quietly.

“No, I’m not.”

Her grandma was sitting in the chair in front of the television, watching infomercials.

“Hi, Grandma.” Jodi went to press a kiss to her forehead, but her grandma stopped her with a hand.

“Let me see it,” she said, gesturing to her leg.

Jodi rolled down her sweatpants to her knees, forgoing modesty, but winced at the sight of the stitches. Her grandma hissed and whispered something in Spanish that might have been a prayer. Jodi pulled up her pants and reached out to help her grandma out of the chair, but she swatted her hand away. She was only sixty-five, and she refused to be treated like an old lady.

Grandma Anna Maria was the only grandmother she’d known, but she was enough grandparent for all of them. She was the kind who snuck you cookies, who made crass jokes, who slipped twenties into your hand with a wink. Her husband had died a year after Jodi’s mother had passed, and Jodi was old enough now to see why Rosa would willingly live with her mother throughout her twenties and thirties. When she was younger she didn’t get why Rosa didn’t get married and move out—she had plenty of boyfriends. Jodi had never had a sibling, but she’d come to realize that losing a sister and father within a year would probably make her afraid, too.

They let Jodi rest in Rosa’s bed until morning, but she couldn’t wind down. She kept seeing Pennywise stretch off the screen and into the sky as the screen collapsed. The sound of Julian screaming in her ear. The streetlamp flickering.

Was Zack right? Were they being punished for hanging out again? Jodi pushed the stupid idea to the side and curled into Rosa’s pillow. Zack hadn’t mentioned any news crews, but she could assume that the freak accident at the Sacramento drive-in would be newsworthy.

She hoped “the Thrashers” wouldn’t be highlighted again, so soon after their last headlines. But the next day she woke up to the headline EMILY MILLS’S BULLIES INJURED AT DRIVE-IN. An entire profile on Julian, his water polo stats, his involvement in the Emily Mills case, and his current condition took up half a page.

Julian wasn't at school on Monday, which was for the best. He was the most banged up out of all of them. Jodi and Paige's limps were already attracting an insane amount of attention, and the stitches at Lucy's hairline were even more gossip-worthy.

During art class, Oliver begged Jodi to tell the story, promising not to put anything on Tumblr or TikTok she didn't want. Nikita was riveted.

"How badly is Julian Hollister hurt?" Oliver asked, shaping his clay.

"Off the record?" Jodi said, and he pouted but nodded. "I don't think he's playing water polo this season."

Oliver shrugged. "He was scouted last year. He might be fine."

But when she looked over to Julian's seat in anatomy later that afternoon, she wondered if he saw it that way.

She took notes for him in anatomy for the rest of the week. According to Paige, he'd tried to come to school on Wednesday, but at lunch someone had accidentally knocked into him. It jarred his ribs so badly that he had to go home, popping Vicodin like candy on the way out.

Jodi couldn't ride her bike or else the stitches would open, but she hopped on the bus after school on Friday and headed to his house in the tree-lined Fab Forties, the "king-size Snickers on Halloween" blocks. As she walked up to the driveway, she scoffed when she saw a brand-new black truck in front of Julian's house.

The Hollister house was Sacramento-famous—an English Tudor-style mansion with a pool and manicured gardens that stretched back to the next block over. It was the house Ronald Reagan lived in while he was governor of California. Despite it being the largest and nicest house between the group of them, they never had parties or hangouts at Julian's. It was rare that he invited anybody over but Zack. Jodi thought maybe his parents warned him about keeping the house "historically preserved."

Ray Hollister was a housing developer who'd met a daytime soap star in Hollywood, left his first wife, married the actress, and then had Julian. Jodi didn't see him or his wife, Nina, often, so when Ray opened the front door and said, "Josie! Nice to see you!" she didn't bother correcting him. Ray Hollister wasn't someone who was often corrected.

He gestured for her to find Julian in his room upstairs, and Jodi traced the path she had only taken once or twice before. She twisted up the stairs and headed for the room at the end of the hall, passing the loving family

photos and framed catalog ads that Julian had done for GapKids and American Eagle. She knocked on his door and heard “What” in response. The sound of video game guns and explosives rippled under the door.

“It’s Jodi,” she said, feeling awkward about walking into his room if he was expecting his mom or something.

There was a pause, and the video games quieted. “Jodi who.”

She rolled her eyes and opened the door.

He was sitting up in bed, shirt off (pants on, thankfully), running a hand through his hair and lifting his brows at her. His room was cleaner than she’d expected—no clothes on the floor, bed made and sheets tucked, no empty plates or glasses on surfaces.

She narrowed her gaze on him. “Are you ... tidy?”

“What are you doing here?” he asked, ignoring her question.

She reached into her backpack and grabbed the stack of photocopies. “Anatomy notes from this week. Lucy gave me her English notes from the past few days, and I asked Becca Gardner for her precalc notes. There was a quiz today that you missed.”

She extended the stack to him. When he just stared at her, she eventually dropped them on his bed.

“Do you want a trophy?” he said drily.

She opened her mouth to snap back, but the very careful way her eyes had been avoiding his skin failed, and she saw his chest for the first time. His left side from his armpit to his waist was purple. The shoulder above was just as dark.

She bit back her comment. “Are you coming back on Monday?”

He looked away from her and unpause his game. “That’s what they say.”

Jodi’s chest felt empty. She’d thought maybe they had something to say to each other. The sound of his screaming against her throat, or the way he’d told her to just go. The slam of her chin on the truck bed as his body covered her.

But she guessed she’d been wrong.

“Kay. See you Monday.” She grabbed her backpack, wincing as she leaned on her right leg by accident. She was considering calling an Uber to take her home so she didn’t have to walk to the bus.

“Where’s the cut?”

Turning back, she found him watching her. She patted her right thigh.

“Where?”

“Um...” Placing her thumb on her jeans to the top of the stitch, she stretched her pinky to where the bottom was six inches lower. “Here-ish.”

He stared at her leg so hard, she felt heat rise up in her cheeks.

“Will it scar?”

She nodded. “Yeah, they say so.”

He tore his eyes from her leg and turned back to his game, his jaw set tight.

Jodi stood in his doorway, feeling untethered. Maybe he blamed her. She’d frozen as that screen came down. He could have saved his shoulder, ribs, and water polo career if she’d just flattened like the rest of them.

She left his room, shutting the door behind her, and hobbled down his stairs. It wasn’t until she was on the bus that she realized she’d started bleeding through her jeans on the walk to the bus stop.

# Chapter Eleven

SEPTEMBER

Paige called her crying one evening, and Jodi's heart stopped when she said, "I got paperwork. Me and Lucy both. Criminal harassment of Emily Mills."

Paige sniffed, and Jodi found her breath. "What does that mean? What kind of harassment?"

"I don't know. We have to appear in front of a judge and say we're not guilty"—her voice broke—"and I don't think I can do it, Jodi. What about college? What am I supposed to do?"

Jodi listened to her cry, assuring her it would be alright, and went to check the mailbox for the third time that day. Still nothing. She'd been checking the mail every afternoon, dreading the day she'd see official-looking paperwork from the district attorney's office.

The school had only recently let go of the drive-in gossip now that Paige's limp had faded, Lucy and Jodi's stitches had been taken out, and Julian had started walking like normal again. This would stir up a whole other kind of drama once it got out.

"And Lucy has something weird in her papers," Paige said. "Something about assault."

"What do they mean by assault?" Jodi said, voice hollow.

"I don't know. Lucy said she can't talk about it anymore. Her dad and her lawyer are locking her down."

Jodi let Paige talk it out, wondering what it was Lucy had done. What had Emily written about in her journal?

In the last week of September, Jodi's dad called her on the road to Oregon.

"I just got off the phone with the DA's office. They want to interview you. I called Miranda Perez, and she said you don't have to say a single thing. She'll sit in the room with you and do the 'No comment' thing until it's over."

"And that's okay? With me being a minor?" she asked, her voice too high. Her mind was running a mile a minute.

"Miranda will be there as your guardian. Unless," he paused, "I mean, I could call out of my Florida trip next week—"

"No. That's okay," Jodi said quickly.

Money was tight. Jodi was putting away every dime, and her dad was taking longer shifts, all to prepare for Miranda's retainer to run out.

"Are court-appointed attorneys real, or is that just a TV thing?" she asked. "Like if it's only saying 'No comment,' then maybe we don't need Miranda after all—"

"I'm not letting you walk into that fucking courthouse with a glorified stenographer while your rich friends walk scot-free thanks to their \$15,000 retainer," he snapped.

Jodi swallowed, listening to the truck engine rattle through the phone. "Yeah, of course." She took a deep breath, relaxing her voice, directing the conversation back to exactly where he wanted it to go. "Miranda will be fine. I'll just stay quiet and let her do the talking."

★ ★ ★

Jodi met Miranda at a coffee shop after school the following Monday. Her appointment with the DA's office was at four, and she hadn't been able to concentrate on anything that day. She'd Snapchatted the others, asking if they'd been interviewed about anything. They hadn't. Julian, Paige, and Lucy had received arraignment paperwork in the mail, and Zack had been formally charged when he was arrested, but none of them had had a one-on-one with the investigative team.

"Why would they even want to interview me if I have a lawyer present? What do they expect to get out of me?" she asked Miranda.

“Well, they might be just applying pressure, hoping you know something. I know that’s scary, but just remember—you did nothing wrong.”

Jodi nodded, hoping that was true.

“You’re not a hothead, are you?” Miranda smiled into her latte.

“No, not really.”

“Then this should be a breeze. Honestly, I don’t know what they want out of you, either, but if they can’t rile you up, then they won’t get it.”

Miranda drove them over to the courthouse, full of beige hallways and asbestos air. There was a small lobby with four uncomfortable chairs, and Jodi sat on the edge of one while Miranda stood, checking her phone.

“Jodi Dillon.”

Her head snapped up, and there was Detective Harding—red lipstick, ponytail, and fake shoes. She was smiling at Jodi, but it was different than the catlike smile from three months ago. This time it was an imitation of sincere, encouraging.

She stood and introduced Miranda. She watched them shake hands. Then she followed Detective Harding into a room with a large table and two other people sitting in chairs facing the door.

“This is Assistant District Attorney Buechler and his colleague Henry Yang.”

Buechler stood and shook Jodi’s hand. He was a good-looking man with silver hair and thick-framed glasses. He could have been an eyewear model in another life. Yang simply nodded at her before continuing his notes, the fluorescent lights casting odd shadows on his angular jaw. Miranda pulled up a chair for Jodi, then herself, and then Jodi was staring down the tunnels of Buechler’s dark blue eyes.

“Thank you for coming in, Miss Dillon. We’d just like to ask you a few questions to follow up on the interview Detective Harding had with you in July.”

Miranda cut in, “Can I ask for the record if Miss Dillon is being charged with anything at this time?” Jodi almost jerked at the firm, acerbic tone of her voice.

Buechler tilted his head at her. “Not at this time, no.”

She cast a quick glance to Miranda, who was pulling out a legal pad and a pen.

“Alright,” Buechler said, sitting forward in his chair. “Miss Dillon—or, may I call you Jodi?”

“Please refer to my client as Miss Dillon.”

Jodi tried not to let her eyebrows reach her hairline as Miranda’s “lawyer voice” reappeared. She didn’t look up from her notes.

“Miss Dillon,” Buechler started again. “How old are you?”

Jodi paused. When Miranda didn’t say anything, she responded, “Seventeen.”

“And when did you meet Emily Mills?”

“When she transferred to New Helvetia. My junior year, her sophomore year.”

“At the beginning of the year? Middle of the year?”

“We had a class first semester, but I probably didn’t talk to her until October.”

Yang cleared his throat. “And that would be October 2023?”

“Yes.” She watched him scribble.

Buechler tapped his fingertips against the table and continued, “So you were in a class with Emily a whole month and a half before speaking to her. Is that common for you, Miss Dillon?”

“No comment,” Miranda said.

Jodi chewed the inside of her cheek. It *was* common for her. She’d realized this during the current semester as she’d tried to make new friends. But it wasn’t intentional, like Buechler was trying to make it sound.

“What did you and Emily Mills talk about when you were together?”

“No comment.”

Buechler was unfazed, as if he expected her interjection. “Did Emily ever talk about suicide with you?”

“No comment.”

Jodi’s eyes flashed to Detective Harding, who was leaning back with a bored expression. “Like I told Detective Harding, Emily never mentioned suicide or that she was depressed.”

Miranda shifted next to her, and she knew she should have stayed quiet. But it was the truth, no matter what a journal said.

“Is there anything else you’d like to say on that, Miss Dillon?” Buechler asked.

Jodi shook her head. He flipped a page.

“When did you meet Zackary Thrasher?”

“In second grade.”

“Would you say you’re close?” Buechler looked up from his notes to watch her response. Miranda hesitated.

“Yes, we’re very close.”

“Do you now or have you ever had a sexual relationship with Zackary Thr—?”

“No comment.”

Buechler stared her down, ignoring Miranda, and waiting for Jodi to react. She pushed her thumb into her pressure point and counted to five.

“No comment,” Jodi said, with as even an expression as she could muster.

Buechler barreled on. “You say you’re very close. Would you say that Zackary Thrasher shares everything with you?”

“No comment,” Miranda said.

He turned a page, and Yang did the same.

“When did you meet Julian Hollister?”

Jodi blinked. “Uh, freshman year.”

“Would you say you’re close—?”

“No,” Jodi said immediately. “We’re not.”

Buechler stared at her over his designer glasses before sliding them up the bridge of his nose. He hummed. “You were at the Sacramento drive-in with Julian Hollister on Friday, August twenty-third, were you not?”

Jodi felt like her tongue didn’t work. “We were all at the drive-in. The five of us.”

“You were in a car with Julian Hollister,” he stated.

Miranda hesitated.

“I was,” Jodi said.

“He told the ticket booth employee that you were on a date.”

Jodi’s mouth opened and closed. They’d interviewed the guy at the drive-in about them. Why? What did that mean?

“Is there a question?” Miranda prodded.

“Were you on a date—?”

“That was a joke. We were not on a date.” Jodi’s voice was climbing octaves.

Miranda placed a subtle hand on her knee, and she took a deep breath, remembering herself.

Buechler placed his pen down and steepled his fingers on the table. “We have phone records indicating that Julian Hollister texted Emily Mills on the day that she died. Do you know what that text message said?”

A cold trickling sensation pricked down her spine. She could barely hear Miranda’s “No comment” response.

Why had Julian texted Emily? She thought back to the notes in the counselor’s office, the page she’d stolen.

*Julian H. said he’d order a corsage for her to match the girls.*

Was that part true? Had Julian purposefully tricked Emily into thinking she was going, only to text her before prom that it had been a game?

Jodi realized that three sets of eyes were on her. Buechler, Yang, and Harding were watching her closely, as if waiting for her to magically reveal her thoughts.

Buechler pressed his lips together and said, “Were you aware that Julian texted Emily that day?”

“No comment.”

Jodi almost wanted to answer that one, to make sure they knew she was clean. But Miranda was smart to jump on it.

“You don’t know what the text messages said?” Yang asked.

Jodi narrowed her eyes as Miranda did her thing. *This* was why she had been brought in. Three questions about *this*.

“Why don’t *you* know what the text messages said?” asked Jodi, looking between all three of them. “What does Emily’s phone show?”

Harding and Buechler returned her stare without moving a muscle. But Yang dropped his eyes and scratched a note.

Jodi ignored Miranda’s squeeze to her knee. “You don’t have her phone, do you?” she asked, waiting with her breath held.

For some reason, Buechler nodded. “It hasn’t been recovered, no.”

Her fingertips were buzzing as her mind spun. What would Emily have done with her phone?

There was a conversation ... almost six months ago ... something about hiding places.

Emily had claimed to have a joint stashed at home. She’d been trying to connect with Lucy as Lucy took a hit from Julian’s pipe.

*I haven't smoked it yet. I can't do it at home or my dad would totally kill me. But he'll never find it where I've hidden it.*

She'd smiled at Jodi. Jodi had sent her a weak grin.

Mr. Mills was a stickler. Probably too harsh on a teenage girl who had no bad behavior to speak of. Emily had said he would search her and her sister's rooms—turning over mattresses, opening vents, ripping up loose floorboards.

Emily had to keep even makeup hidden. It wasn't allowed. She'd told Jodi she had the perfect place to hide it all ...

Emily and Hannah's shared bathroom. In a secret spot.

Buechler cleared his throat, and Jodi jumped.

"Do you know where Emily's phone might be?"

He sounded almost hopeful.

Jodi had to find out what was in those texts before she cooperated. She lifted her chin. "Can't you recover things?"

"One text message has been recovered. The other was a link to something," Buechler said. "Do you know what kind of link Julian Hollister would have sent her?"

"No comment," Jodi said. She had no idea.

Buechler sighed and sat back. He tilted his chin at Detective Harding, and Jodi watched her lean forward on her elbows.

"Miss Dillon, where does the name *the Thrashers* come from?" Harding asked.

Miranda waited, and Jodi said, "It's something the school came up with."

"The school? The administration?"

"No, the students. During freshman year."

Harding gave a barely perceptible nod. "And is that how long you've been a Thrasher? Since your freshman year?"

"I don't call myself that. It's not—" She tried to collect her thoughts before they spilled from her lips. "We didn't agree to the name. The five of us would rather not be called that."

"But it does come with perks, doesn't it?"

Jodi kept her mouth pressed shut, waiting for Detective Harding to continue.

Harding tilted her head, and Jodi realized that Buechler was allowing her to lead this section. He and Yang were rapt with attention.

“What’s the question?” Miranda prodded.

“Do you think there are perks to being a Thrasher?” Harding said.

“No comment,” Miranda said to her notes.

“I asked you when we last talked if you helped any of your friends with their grades.” Harding stared at Jodi, like waiting for a fish on a line. “You said you didn’t. Are there other reasons why Zackary Thrasher, Julian Hollister, Lucy Reed, and Paige Montgomery would want you around?”

Miranda looked up. Jodi stared back, feeling her pulse pounding.

“We’re friends,” she said weakly.

Harding paused, as if Jodi would continue. She decided not to.

“Why do you think you’re friends? What do you think you add to the dynamic?”

Her breath stuck in her throat. It was the poignant question she’d spent the last three years obsessing over. Longer, maybe. Since Zack got his braces off in seventh grade and Kacey Andrews asked him to a dance. Since Julian and Zack’s first sleepover freshman year. Since the first pool party with Lucy and Paige. Since the first time Julian tried to leave her off a group chat.

“I’ve been friends with Zack since—”

“Second grade, yes,” Harding said, glancing down at her notes, though Jodi knew she didn’t need to. “Why do you think your bond is so strong, seeing as your socioeconomic positions are different, your hobbies are different, and your relationship has never become sexual?”

Jodi swallowed, and Harding’s eyes dipped, catching it. She felt pressure on all sides of her body, like she was deep, deep in the ocean. When Jodi couldn’t answer, Harding continued.

“Would you classify yourself as ‘the funny one’ or ‘the smart one?’ Anything like that?”

The implication was clear. *You are not “the pretty one,” “the sexy one.”*

Jodi glanced at Buechler. He was watching her with a predator’s eye, waiting for the weakness. Yang twirled his pen.

“Jodi,” Detective Harding said softly, friendly, “have you ever worried that you were going to be Thrashed?”

Her eyes welled.

*Every day of my life.*

She was giving them exactly what they wanted. That's why Harding took lead on this. She already knew it. With her fake Louboutins and her clever nicknames—"Box-Dye."

Jodi took a steadying breath.

"No comment."

Case No. 4512420

Excerpt from the journal of Emily Mills

Entered into evidence 6.08.2024 by Det. Chelsea Harding

**SEPT. 24, 2023**

**I'VE BEEN THINKING A LOT ABOUT JODI DILLON. SHE'S NOT THAT PRETTY. SHE MIGHT BE PRETTIER THAN ME, BUT THAT'S BECAUSE SHE KNOWS HOW TO DO HER EYELINER. SHE'S NOT RICH LIKE THE REST OF THEM. I'M WAY RICHER. I'M SKINNIER THAN HER, I'M SMARTER THAN HER. SHE MIGHT HAVE BIGGER BOOBS. I DON'T KNOW.**

**BUT I'VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT HER BECAUSE SHE MATTERS TO ZACK FOR SOME REASON. I FOUND OUT THAT THEY WENT TO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TOGETHER AND HAVE BEEN FRIENDS FOREVER. I LOOKED UP YEARBOOK PICTURES FROM PHOEBE HEARST ELEMENTARY. SHE WAS CUTE, BUT ZACK WAS CUTER—WITH HIS LITTLE FLOPPY HAIR. UGH I WANNA DIEEE.**

**I JUST DON'T GET HER. IT FEELS LIKE MAYBE ... LIKE IF SHE CAN BE A THRASHER, MAYBE I CAN, TOO. YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE BEAUTIFUL OR RICH OR HAVE PERFECT LEGS LIKE PAIGE MONTGOMERY OR GO BRALESS LIKE LUCY REED DOES. I THINK YOU JUST HAVE TO BE IMPORTANT TO ZACK.**

**I COULD BE IMPORTANT TO HIM. I KNOW I COULD.**

**I HAVE A B- IN BIO BECAUSE I'M SPENDING CLASS WATCHING JODI DILLON. DAD TOOK AWAY MY PHONE, MY IPAD, MY LAPTOP. HE DOESN'T KNOW THAT THOSE AREN'T DISTRACTING ME (UNLESS I'M STARING AT ZACK'S INSTAGRAM UNTIL I FALL ASLEEP). I CAN'T LISTEN TO MRS. HUBERMAN TALK ABOUT MITOSIS—NOT WHEN JODI IS SITTING NEXT TO ME. SHE'S FASCINATING.**

**I THINK I COULD BE HER IF I TRIED.**

# Chapter Twelve

OCTOBER

Two weeks before homecoming, Zack sat down next to her under the oak tree and said, “I just went to the office to decline the homecoming king nomination, *if* there’s a nomination.”

Jodi stopped chewing her peanut butter sandwich and swallowed drily. “What?”

“The juniors are nominating Emily for junior princess.” He ran a hand through his hair roughly. “At least twenty of them did, so she’ll be on the ballot for sure.”

Jodi breathed deep, staring out over the field.

New Helvetia had miniature ceremonies for each class, crowning princes and princesses, but guaranteeing that a senior would be crowned queen. As long as she’d known her, Paige had talked about senior year homecoming queen. Zack was just a given. Every year. Julian had a chance against him last year when he brought the water polo team to championships, but he hadn’t batted an eye when he lost to Zack.

Jodi had just filled out her ballot with Zack and Paige’s names on it last week.

“It’s not worth it,” Zack said. “My dad agreed. Big agreed. I just ... I really think Paige needs to bow out, too.”

Jodi rubbed a hand over her brow, kneading away the tension. She knew that was right. If the school wanted to make this night about honoring Emily, Paige’s name on the ballot—or worse, *winning* the damn thing—would be horrendous.

“We can talk to her together,” Jodi said to Zack. “I think she needs to decline. It’s for the best.”

They found her after school, preparing for a Model UN meet. Jodi hated messing with her head before a competition, but Paige nodded and said she’d think about it.

As Jodi was falling asleep that night, their group chat got a text: **i’m bowing out. please tell me we can ditch the dance or leave early. i can’t watch**

None of them had dates. Lucy had forced them into going stag again at the beginning of the school year—“I refuse to have drama two dances in a row.” Later, she’d confided in Jodi that Zack had started flirting with a girl named Kiera in his chemistry class over the summer. She was afraid of getting any more accusations of Thrashing another girl while they were under a microscope. Jodi had been distracted all day about this Kiera girl—probably the reason why Zack had failed chemistry for the third time. But also ... another girl, another competitor for Zack’s time and interest.

Jodi was only thinking about Kiera a little bit when she wrote back to Paige, suggesting that maybe they make an appearance and then exit quickly. She was shocked at Zack’s response:

**Under the bleachers?** 🍷🍷

She smiled, thinking how nice it would be to just hang out instead of worry about how she looked while dancing, or if she’d have to pretend to be thirsty every time a slow song came on so she wouldn’t be just standing there alone.

Surprisingly, Julian was the first to text back: **read my mind**

Then Lucy: **finally a good fucking idea from u**

Jodi texted back her agreement, and then sent a message to Paige separately that it would be okay.

She sent back the dancing pink hearts she always used.

★ ★ ★

Emily Mills’s name was on the junior ballot on Monday morning, and not a single Thrasher was on the senior one. Oliver told her that he was shocked to see that, but Jodi could tell he was ready to update his followers, so she kept her response concise.

When Aunt Rosa offered to take her shopping for her homecoming dress, she didn't refuse. She'd be wearing last year's dress otherwise. She didn't have any extra cash for a new one this year, as all of it was going straight to her legal fees. Jodi had sold her iPad—brand-new over Christmas last year—and found a place to sell her clothes online. She budgeted their shopping list carefully, but she couldn't help but notice that her dad came home with six-packs of beer often.

Rosa had picked out a short, sleeveless burgundy dress with fluffy tulle at the hips that Jodi would never have tried on herself, but once Rosa saw it on her, that had been the end of it. Jodi couldn't really argue with someone who was willing to drop two hundred dollars on a dress for her. Rosa had tried to steer her toward the shoes, but Jodi stopped her.

"We do Converse for homecoming, heels for prom. I can wear my black Converse."

Rosa had then bought her a pair of those wedge-heeled Converse that only someone like Lucy could get away with. Jodi had mumbled a thank-you.

But now, standing in front of Paige's bedroom mirror the day of homecoming, Jodi couldn't believe how much the scar on her thigh stood out. How had she not seen it in the dressing room at the mall? Maybe it was the shoes? Lifting her butt higher? Didn't heels do that?

She was half tempted to put back on the leggings she'd worn on the bus over.

"Babe, that's *beautiful!*" Paige squealed. "And look at those *shoes!*"

Paige, herself, was in sequined pink Converse and a pink and white dress. With a mascara wand in one hand, Lucy stepped out of the bathroom to see Jodi's dress, and Jodi's jaw dropped.

Black leather Converse. Black dress with a corset on the ribcage, tucking in her tiny waist, and puffy tulle hips like Jodi's.

"You look amazing, Jo." Lucy beamed at her.

"Lucy, you look sinful."

Lucy winked back at her, and Paige settled Jodi in a chair so she could start curling her hair. Aunt Rosa had bought her a clutch to go with, and Jodi had returned it the next day, using the money to buy the at-home hair dye she wanted.

Zack and Julian would pick them up at seven, and then they'd all squeeze into Zack's car for the short ride over. They'd make one circle of the gym, just to be seen, and then separately head out to the bleachers for the rest of the night. Homecoming court winners were announced around nine, so they had plenty of time to miss it for Paige's sake.

While they waited for the boys, the three of them took their annual pictures on Paige's staircase. Every homecoming since freshman year, back when Jodi was still wondering why she'd agreed to "get ready" with Zack's new hot friends, the three girls took the "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" pictures on the Montgomery staircase. Even when Paige was dating Charlie Shaw sophomore year, she had told him to stand aside so Jodi, Lucy, and she could take their picture. Jodi sat on the bottom stair with her hands over her mouth and her eyes popped wide, Paige behind her with her hands over her ears, and Lucy above them, peeking through her fingers over her eyes.

Cheryl Montgomery rounded them up at 6:45 and set them up. She snapped a few other poses, asking Paige to "please smile with your teeth, honey."

Paige grabbed her phone back from her mom to check the pictures, and Jodi saw her face fall.

"What's wrong?" Cheryl said. "Did I have my thumb over the flash again?"

Paige was pale beneath her contouring when she said, "No, it's perfect." She smiled at her mom and turned to show Jodi, smile gone.

There, just above Lucy's head on the stairs, a white flare. Like a splotch, or a reflection. Like a fourth person on the totem pole.

Jodi snapped her eyes up to Paige. "It's fine. It's—it's just your phone. I'll edit it out. Send it to me."

Cheryl announced that Zack had pulled up as Lucy grabbed Paige's phone and looked.

"Paige, you gotta stop it with this," she whispered firmly.

Nodding, Paige brushed her lashes and fanned her face, taking a deep breath to bury it. "It just really freaks me out."

"It's just your phone—"

"It's a new phone," Paige hissed. "I took my phone back last week and traded it out."

Lucy blinked at her, searching for words.

The front door opened. “Eyyyy, did someone order a homecoming date?” Zack danced inside, moving to Cheryl to hug her tightly.

Paige smiled a bit too brightly and seemed to push it all to the side. The five of them took pictures that would never see Instagram, accepted wine coolers from Paige’s mom (except Jodi and Zack, who had promised to drive), and agreed to call for a ride back if they needed it. Before they left the house, Zack stopped them all in the entryway. He jumped up on the bottom stair and cleared his throat theatrically.

“I know this homecoming is a little different from what we wanted. But I thought it would be nice to acknowledge the true queen of New Helvetia High.” He smirked and pointed at Paige. “Julian grabbed this yesterday and had the idea to do our own coronation.”

Zack reached into his blazer inside pocket and pulled out a Burger King crown that they give to kids. Paige snorted, cackling as she let Zack crown her. Cheryl took pictures like it was the real ceremony as Lucy and Jodi laughed.

Jodi looked over to Julian and saw him smiling at Paige in her stupid cardboard crown. He was in a blue button-down and charcoal slacks—no tie, no jacket. Only Julian Hollister could make dressed-down look dressed-up. The shirt was probably tailored for him, if the way it hugged his ribs and waist was any indication. Her gaze drifted back to his face just in time for him to glance her way. Jodi pulled her eyes away quickly.

They finally crammed into Zack’s Mustang at ten after seven and drove to the back entrance of the school parking lot. Jodi hovered at Paige’s elbow once in the gym, saying hi to the people who talked to Paige, but not really seeing any point in mingling with people she didn’t know. She saw Oliver, Nikita, and a few others dancing, flailing limbs and screaming lyrics. Oliver waved when he saw her, and Jodi felt her chest swell when she sent him a shy wave back.

Paige started dancing with some friends from cheer squad, and Jodi excused herself, despite Paige begging her to dance. Her Converse wedges were pinching her, though it was nice to be closer to Paige and Lucy’s height with the extra three inches. She slipped out the side door, winding quickly through the locker room, where she could hear people hooking up, and out the exterior door to the field.

No one was around, despite the security guards that usually patrolled. She made her way toward the bleachers, trekking through the crisscross beams until reaching their usual spot under the rows behind the accessible seating. She was the first one there, or so she thought.

“Did Spencer Gordon not ask you to dance this time?” a voice called from above.

She looked up through the bleachers and saw black Chucks sitting above her, the smell of pot curling through the air. Making her way out from under the rows, she entered the field and found Julian sitting on the fifth bench up, staring out at the field.

“Spencer Gordon? He hasn’t talked to me all semester.” Spencer had asked her to dance at prom last year. It was nice to not be alone during a slow song, but she couldn’t help but be suspicious that Paige had set it up somehow. She didn’t think about it much after that, because it had been the night Emily died.

Jodi climbed up and sat on the fourth row, straddling the bench in a way that would make Aunt Rosa cluck her tongue.

“That’s because you hide at lunch.” He took a drag and puffed it out. She rolled her eyes and stared out at the parking lot. “He talks about you. It’s annoying.”

Snapping her eyes up to him, Jodi stared. “He talks about me? What does that mean?”

He sucked in a breath of clean air and said in a dull, mocking voice, “‘I guess Jodi didn’t take calculus this year, huh?’ ‘Was Jodi hurt at the drive-in?’ ‘So, you guys all going stag to homecoming? Is Jodi going stag?’”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “You’re exaggerating. Spencer hasn’t talked to me since prom.” Waving away his smoky exhale, she bit her lip. Spencer was really cute, and they had a lot of the same favorite TV shows. She shook her head clear and said, “He has my number. If he liked me, he could have texted or something.”

“Sometimes it doesn’t work that way.” Julian stretched out his chest, pulling his arms back with a pop. “Look at you. You’ve had Zack’s number for ten years.”

Her gaze left the buttons pulling tight across his sternum. She felt the air drift from her lungs and the blood drain from her face.

His lips broke into a smile at her expression. Conniving. His tongue dragged along his teeth, and she looked back to the parking lot, watching headlights illuminate a row of cars.

“Tell the truth, Dillon. Do you think Zack’s going to just wake up one morning and realize he loves you back, or—”

“Shut up.” Her face was hot, and she felt embarrassed tears spring into her eyes. “Just—God—”

“Because you better move quick. He’s been looking forward to dancing with this Kiera girl all week.”

She stood up, needing space. She walked down the bleacher row to the end of it.

“I’m just saying,” he called after her, “don’t be sleeping on Spencer.”

She ignored him. He’d made comments before. She knew she wasn’t subtle, but she wasn’t exactly broadcasting her dream journal or anything obvious like that. But if he was going to tell Zack she had feelings for him, he’d be ruining a good thing.

She felt the bleachers creak, the clomp of shoes on the slats. A body slumped down next to her. She crossed her arms over her chest, wishing she had a sweater—feeling too vulnerable with her shoulders bared.

“I think you’ll tell him before graduation,” he said, puffing out smoke. She waved her hand through it. “I think you’ll be standing in your cap and gown, waiting to cross the stage, and you’ll grab his arm and say ‘Zack. I have feelings for you. I’m sorry I never told you. I was a coward.’” His voice was melodramatic and pitched just right to imitate her.

“Why would I tell him?” she snapped. “Why would I risk changing everything when it wouldn’t make a difference?”

“No difference? You don’t have hope in your heart—?”

“I know he doesn’t feel the same way, okay? I don’t know what you’re trying to do here—maybe get me to make an ass of myself, or make Zack so uncomfortable that he doesn’t want to be around me—but if you want to humiliate me, you’ll have to do it yourself.”

She stared across the field, eyes focused on the opposite bleachers like there was something interesting to see there. She could feel him watching her. As he brought the burnt-down joint to his mouth again, she snapped her hand out and grabbed it, putting it between her lips and taking a small puff. Maybe it was peer pressure. Maybe it was another night of her friends

getting high and drunk and her just watching. She'd smoked before. She didn't really like it, but sometimes it was nice to not look like the prude by just barely inhaling and smiling more over the next few hours.

She handed it back to him, and when he didn't take it, she met his eyes. He was smirking at her. Finally he took it and stubbed it out. As he leaned, she watched his eyes catch on her thigh, where the scar from the drive-in was on full display. She wanted to tug the skirt down, but she refrained. His fingers twitched, like he was going to run his fingertips across it, but that wasn't like him.

His eyes glided up from the scar, casting over the tulle and the bodice.

"It's a nice dress," he said, and she searched for that mocking tone again, about to tell her that Zack would like it or some other taunt.

"Shut the fuck up." She stood, anxious for more space from him, and didn't analyze why her hand immediately went to smooth down the dress, making sure it still looked "nice" as she walked away, down the bleachers in her too-tall wedges to sit two rows below him.

"Hey!" Paige was jogging out from their usual spot. "We the only ones ditching tonight?"

"Looks like." Julian slipped a bottle of vodka from the benches. He must have come straight here from the car, not even stopping to socialize at the dance. "Raspberry for the homecoming queen," he said, passing the bottle down to Paige.

Paige took a healthy sip of the flavored vodka just as Zack and Lucy joined. Julian lit another joint, puffed once, and stretched forward to hand it to Jodi. When she took it, Lucy raised a brow.

"Oo-hoo-hoo. We're gonna party tonight." She danced up the bleacher steps to join Jodi in the third row, pressing her lips forward until Jodi got the message. She inhaled—more than she wanted to—and passed her exhale into Lucy's open mouth. She sucked it in, and exhaled out, "Thatta girl."

Jodi laughed. Zack and Paige were passing the vodka back and forth, talking quietly. It made Jodi's chest tight to see them whispering, but her conversation with Julian was fresh in her mind, so she looked away. Lucy set her clutch down on the bench beside her and spun to Julian.

"When are you back in the water?" She took the joint from Jodi, puffed, and passed it back up to Julian.

“I’m already swimming at home.”

Jodi looked over her shoulder. “Wasn’t your recovery six to ten weeks?”

He lifted a brow and shrugged. “Yeah. So what?”

Jodi rolled her eyes and turned back around as Zack climbed up the bleachers toward them. Paige was scrolling her phone for a playlist.

Zack plopped next to her and fluffed up her skirt. “This is a nice dress. You look great.”

She beamed at him, feeling her cheeks flush. “Thanks. Rosa picked it out.”

Suddenly, Julian jumped up, jarring her. “I bet I could still beat Lucy around the field.”

Snorting, Paige said, “Yeah, what’s a few broken ribs?”

“I’m serious.” He ran down the bleachers to the grass. “You down?”

Lucy smiled at him, slow and mischievous. “You’re setting yourself up for pain *and* humiliation.”

“This may be your only chance to beat me,” Julian heckled, stretching his quads.

Lucy was up off the bleachers and jogging down to the grass in a heartbeat. “Jo, check to see if I have my inhaler,” she called up to her.

Shaking her head at their dumb theatrics, Jodi unzipped Lucy’s clutch and confirmed that her inhaler was there. Paige agreed to time them, and Lucy and Julian set off, both sets of Converse keeping a steady pace before they started to break.

“Who’re the likely homecoming winners?” Jodi asked, as Paige sat on the bench in front of her and Zack. “Or would you rather not talk about it?”

“No,” Paige said, waving her hand. “It’s fine. Reagan is campaigning hard. She’s probably very excited to take as much away from us as she can. And Jake Flynn is tied with Hugo Vargas, that kid who filmed a movie this summer.”

“Oh, him. Mrs. Calloway talks about him all the time. She locked herself in her office when she found out he wasn’t going to audition.”

“What’s the play this year?” Zack picked up the forgotten joint and opened Lucy’s purse for her lighter.

“*Our Town*.”

“Hm. Is it good?”

“I dunno. I’m currently painting ‘a town’ on the backdrop with Oliver Burns.”

The pot made her head feel light, like there was too much air being pumped in.

Lucy and Julian were halfway around, neck and neck, but she was sure Lucy was saving her energy for the final turn.

“That’s so weird that he’s talking to you again,” Paige said. “Is he the same as he was in middle school? Just like, on drugs?” She laughed.

Jodi forced herself to do the same, even though she wasn’t sure it was that funny, seeing as Zack was currently inhaling a used joint and Paige was nursing the vodka like a newborn.

“He’s still funny. We don’t have too much in common except art now, but he’s in two of my classes. It’s nice to have someone I know seeing as we don’t do a lot of stuff together anymore.”

“We do stuff. We’re doing this.” Paige looked up at her with puppy dog eyes, and Jodi just smiled back. No point in reminding her that they hadn’t been together since the drive-in. That their group chat only popped off when Jodi instigated. That outside of English, she didn’t see Paige at all.

Julian and Lucy rounded the final turn. Paige jumped down to cheer on Lucy, who was breaking ahead. It was hard to tell from this distance, but Jodi thought she could see Julian grimacing.

Lucy slapped Paige’s hand first, barely five feet ahead of Julian. They panted on their way back to the bleachers, Julian challenging her to a rematch in two weeks, with proper footwear.

Jodi’s mouth was open to tease him about blaming his shoes, but there was a flicker on her shoulder. She turned around. No one was there.

But up above them, the safety light that stayed on day and night fluttered. And went out.

Jodi stared at the bulb, waiting for it to flicker on again. A wheezing drew her focus back.

Lucy was coughing, still trying to catch her breath. “Jo. My purse,” she breathed.

Jodi grabbed the clutch that held her inhaler and walked it down the steps. When she got to the bottom, she found Paige staring up at the dark lamp, looking pale in the moonlight.

Paige's focus snapped back, and she took the purse from Jodi with a smile, opening it and riffling through for Lucy.

Julian was lying down in the grass on his back, catching his breath. She watched his ribs move quickly. Shallowly. Fucking idiot.

"Where..."

Jodi turned back to Paige. Lucy was sitting on the front bench, wheezing. Paige was digging in the tiny bag. "You said it was in here?" she said to Jodi, eyes wide.

"Yeah." Jodi moved closer. "It was right on top."

Lucy coughed, hacking and hollow.

"Zack!" Jodi looked up to the fifth row of seats where he was stretched out, looking at the stars. "Did you grab her inhaler when you went for the lighter?"

He sat up. "No. It was in there on top."

"Are you sure?" Paige's voice was shrill. She dropped to the grass, turning out Lucy's bag. Out fell her Juul, ID, ChapStick, two twenties. Nothing.

Lucy put her hands on her knees, bracing herself and lowering her head. Her throat sounded like there were rocks grating together inside it.

The bleachers rocked as Zack ran down. "It was right there. I saw it. I promise I saw it."

Paige and Jodi looked up at him from the ground, and behind his head, the emergency light blinked on. Then off again.

Paige got to her feet, like she'd seen a ghost. "Emily..."

"What?"

"It's..." Jodi braced a hand on Lucy's shoulder. "We just need to find it. Paige, stay with her."

Jodi darted underneath the bleachers as Julian finally came over to figure out what was going on. Maybe it fell between the slats. She climbed between the bars, weaving through their favorite spot, and looked up. Zack joined her.

"Could someone have taken it?" he whispered.

"No, look." She pointed to the fifth row of benches where the purse had been. "It's too high to climb this way."

Lucy's hacking was getting worse. Zack ran back around, joining Julian on the benches, searching for the inhaler that Jodi knew in a dark part of

herself wasn't there. She used her phone's flashlight to search the dirt under her feet and found nothing.

She ran back around the bleachers. Paige was sitting on the first bench next to Lucy, her wheezing thin and labored against the corset of her dress.

"What do we do?" Paige's voice was pitched high.

Jodi reached down and started untying the laces at the front of her dress. "It's okay, Lucy. It's okay." They were knotted too tight. "Julian!" Jodi called. "Pocketknife?"

He reached for it and tossed it down to her. Jodi fumbled with it and ripped through the satin laces.

"It's okay, Lucy," she repeated. "Just breathe."

"We—we need to call an ambulance, right? EMTs?" Paige started packing Lucy's purse back together.

"Lucy." Jodi started ripping open her dress, loosening the corset until Lucy's sticky bra cups were the only thing covering her. She placed a hand on her stomach and told her to breathe into it. "Lucy, what do we do?" she said calmly. "Do you have one in your locker?"

She shook her head, her breath coming like reeds sliding against each other.

"Ambulance? We call 911 for asthma and they'll bring an inhaler?"

Julian jumped down. "We'll have to ditch the bottles and the pot—"

"That doesn't fucking matter!" Jodi snapped.

"We can't be in the news again, Jo," Zack said softly, his voice almost begging.

"She can't breathe!" Paige screamed at him.

Lucy grabbed Jodi's wrist and tried to talk. Her dark lips looked bluish.

"Paramedics will take time," Zack said. "Is there someone in the gym —"

"I'll run back," Julian said. "I'll get a teacher and tell them all the shit was mine."

Jodi sat up, an idea sparking. "Zack, sit with her. Keep her calm." She scrolled through her phone to the number she'd used more often in the past two months than all of high school combined.

He answered, and the sounds of the dance were still in the background.

"Lo?"

“Oliver? Do you have your inhaler on you? Your—your Albuterol? Do you still take it?”

“What?”

She walked away from the rest of them, under the bleachers. “I need an inhaler on the football field.”

There was a pause, and then the background noise disappeared like he’d slipped into a hall. “Yeah, I have it.”

“Can you bring it to me? The far side, close to the concession stand they don’t use anymore? The accessible seats—”

“I know where you guys hang out.”

“Can you—can you run?”

Tears were falling down her face. Lucy wasn’t coughing anymore, and she didn’t know what that meant.

She heard shoes slapping against linoleum through the phone. After a handful of heartbeats, the footfalls were coming from her left. Jodi flashed her phone screen at him to signal their location.

He was running—that same gait that got him teased in seventh grade. The inhaler was in his hand, and he was shaking it up as he reached her. She jogged with him through the bars and to the field. Oliver didn’t ask a single question; he went straight to Lucy and helped her sit up straight, helped her grip the inhaler.

The hiss of the Albuterol was like music to her ears. Lucy held her breath, her cheeks blowing out. She exhaled that rickety sound and puffed again, holding it longer this time.

Jodi felt her body start to relax. She felt like *she* had been the one to run the football field, ready to collapse.

It was silent as Lucy held her breath. It wasn’t until she reached up and started tugging the front of her dress back together that Jodi felt things were going to be okay. She was still wheezing, but the inhaler would work.

Lucy turned to Oliver with wet eyes and mouthed, *thank you*.

“Thank you, Oliver,” Jodi echoed. “We didn’t know what to do for her. Her inhaler was here a second ago...” She trailed off as she caught Paige’s expression.

Her blue eyes were glued to the lamppost that had flickered out, her skin pulled tight around her mouth. Jodi looked up. The emergency light flickered once and then stayed on.

Paige moved next to her, reaching for Lucy's clutch. She opened it with shaking fingers and looked inside. A laugh burst from her lips, and she dropped the purse.

They all watched as Paige's cackling slowly melted into tears. She turned, walked five steps, and vomited raspberry vodka onto the grass.

Jodi picked up the clutch and looked inside. Lucy's inhaler was there on top.

## Chapter Thirteen

Reagan Matthews and Jake Flynn were crowned homecoming queen and king. Emily Mills earned junior princess, posthumously.

But they didn't need to tiptoe around Paige with it. Paige wasn't concerned with homecoming anymore. Paige was calling her aunt to ask about the medium she saw. Paige was buying crystals on the internet that kept vengeful spirits away. Paige was refusing to get together just the five of them, as she believed that was what Emily was mad about.

Jodi volunteered to go over to her house and talk to her, try to show her the news articles she'd found of other drive-in screens falling down, but Zack insisted he go.

Jodi lay on her stomach on her bed, FaceTiming with Zack, Paige, Julian, and Lucy.

"Jodi," Paige said suddenly, and Jodi watched her jump up and run out of frame. "I totally forgot. I saw this and grabbed it for you!"

Zack checked his reflection in the FaceTime screen as they waited for Paige to bounce back onto her bed. Paige held up a hot pink flyer.

"It's for an art contest! Zack and I saw it at Burr's!"

"Oh, yeah," Jodi stuttered through a response with the knowledge Zack and Paige had gone to lunch without inviting the rest of them. "I saw that at Burr's, too."

"Are you gonna enter?" Zack asked.

Jodi shook her head noncommittally. "Maybe! It's for twelve-year-olds, too. I don't think I could handle being bested by a seventh grader."

“Or,” Lucy said, “you beat out all the seventh graders, make them cry, and we make Mr. Burr hang your picture next to our favorite booth with a plaque that says ‘For Contest Winners Only.’”

Jodi laughed as they kept building on the joke, talking about Reagan Matthews’s shithead little brother and how to get him to enter the contest just so Jodi could beat him.

At the end of the call, Paige was laughing and taking Zack’s phone and screenshotting the call screen showing all of their faces. Jodi watched her face fall for only a second before laughing at something Julian said. Later, Jodi texted her, **the flare?**

The three dots appeared and disappeared over and over for five minutes. Then finally:

**i think it was just your mirror**

Jodi’s skin broke out in chills. She whipped around, looking over the room, ignoring the rest of Paige’s texts that reassured her that it was just the grainy FaceTime call. She fell into a fitful sleep full of memories.

★ ★ ★

*Jodi sat under a tree, reading the assigned chapters of A Separate Peace, looking up whenever Lucy screamed. They were in an abandoned parking lot at dusk under the pretense of teaching Jodi how to drive, but Jodi hadn’t slid behind the wheel in over an hour.*

*Because Emily wanted to learn how to drive, too.*

*Then, Zack and Paige wanted to play Ride or Die, the game they’d all come up with over the summer.*

*Lucy hollered, and Jodi looked up to see her long, dark limbs splayed over the hood of Paige’s moving car, going about fifteen miles per hour over the potholes in the lot. The point of the game was to ride on the hood of a car, completely at the mercy of the driver.*

*Jodi thought it was the stupidest way to have fun since she tried getting high for the first time, and ... she didn’t think she had the balance to stay on the hood without flying off. They usually played this game in a grassy field, which had the added advantage of being able to land on grass instead of pavement, but the ride was bumpier, too.*

*Paige pulled the car to a stop, Lucy jumped off the hood, and Paige exited the car with Zack, Emily, and Julian.*

*The other reason Jodi didn't want to play?*

*Paige stood in a circle of the four others, squeezed her eyes shut, extended her arm with her finger in a point, and spun in a dizzy spiral. When she stopped, her hand was pointed at Julian. Paige groaned.*

*The other reason was that Jodi didn't like the one-in-four chance she had that Julian would be behind the wheel. She couldn't trust that he would actually stop when the person on the hood screamed out "ride or die!"—their safe word, of sorts. He hadn't stopped when Zack used it last month, and Jodi had yelled at him from the passenger seat of Zack's Mustang.*

*Paige jumped up on the hood of her car, and Julian slipped behind the wheel.*

*Jodi half wished she'd just been dropped off at home, but even if she wasn't participating—even if she was watching Emily Mills take her place in the circle—she didn't want to be left out. If Paige broke her arm today or if Emily crashed Paige's car into a tree, Jodi would have to hear about it secondhand for the rest of the school year.*

*She watched as Paige held on for dear life while Julian accelerated. He angled the car toward a section of grass, and just as Paige started to form the words, "Ride—!," Julian hit the brakes and Paige flew.*

*Jodi gasped, jumping to her feet. Paige shot into the grass, rolling several times. Jodi was running toward her before she heard Paige giggling. Lucy was out of the car and at her side, and then both girls were laughing.*

*"Julian!" Jodi yelled, jogging the rest of the way to the car. "What the fuck?"*

*Julian stepped out of the driver's seat, and when Jodi reached him she shoved him against the door.*

*"Hey! She's fine!" He said, gesturing to Paige, who was still cracking up. "I knew what I was doing, Mom."*

*"Okay, okay," Zack said, stepping between the two of them before Jodi could bite back. "Paige is okay. We all know what we're signing up for when we get on the hood."*

*Jodi spun on her heel and stomped over to Paige. She didn't have a scratch on her. Paige and Lucy assured her that everything was alright.*

*When Jodi turned back toward the car, Zack was helping Emily get onto the hood.*

*“No. Nope.” Jodi shook her head. “Not a chance.” She marched over to the car and reached for Emily’s arm. Emily smiled and slid her hand into Jodi’s instead, allowing herself to be tugged down.*

*“Just because you like to play it safe doesn’t mean Emily does,” Julian said, tilting his head at her.*

*“No. We’re not doing this.” Jodi looked to Paige and Lucy for help.*

*Paige looked conflicted. “Emily, maybe not today, okay?”*

*Lucy rolled her eyes. Zack looked lost.*

*“Emily’s the only one who hasn’t gone yet, though,” Zack said.*

*Jodi hesitated. She knew—she knew—that if Emily got on that hood, she’d get hurt. She felt it in her gut. Either one of them would do something stupid or Emily would try to be braver than she should.*

*Emily held on to Jodi’s hand even as Jodi relaxed her grip. Jodi turned to her.*

*“Didn’t you want to see that Marvel movie tonight?”*

*Sky blue eyes brightened.*

*No one went with them. Emily called an Uber, and they watched some movie about superheroes Jodi knew nothing about. Emily sat on her left and linked their arms, tugging Jodi’s elbow tightly into her side.*

★ ★ ★

Halloween that year lacked excitement. Paige was convinced that it would be tempting fate to do anything together for the holiday, so she bowed out of watching scary movies with the four of them on the Friday before. Jodi couldn’t help but notice that the movie Lucy picked to watch at Zack’s didn’t feature ghosts or hauntings.

Zack was on his phone the entire night, texting. Lucy growled at him several times to knock it off, and that’s when Jodi figured out that it was probably Kiera he was talking to. Jodi’s mood soured after that. Her mind was reeling about Zack actually having the audacity to flirt with a new girl while being charged with statutory rape, but she couldn’t tell if she was justified in that. Maybe she was just jealous.

The next day, Oliver scored cheap tickets to a professional play. Jodi, Nikita, and Oliver drove downtown to take in live theater. When they invited Jodi to a party afterward, she passed, exhausted already. They dropped her off before heading out.

She slipped the key into the lock, and before it even clicked, she heard a football game playing. Taking a steadying breath, she inched the door open and found her dad staring blearily at the television. There were five bottles at his feet and a sixth in his hand.

After dropping her bag near the entry, she shut the door with enough noise to announce her presence.

He turned over the arm of his chair. "Why were you out so late?"

Jodi lifted her brows. "What? It's like, midnight."

Her dad's face hardened. "Excuse me? It's a school night, Jodi."

"It's Saturday, Dad."

She swept to the kitchen to start the dishes. They were all hers, because he was never home to eat on them, but she was still boiling that he'd been home for probably four hours with nothing to show for it except empty bottles and the McDonald's bag on the counter.

"The check for your lawyer was cashed today," he said, barely audible under the television.

Jodi scrubbed the pan she'd made pasta in last night, waiting for it.

"Three thousand dollars. *Three thousand* just to sit next to you and say 'No comment.'"

"It's her retainer, Dad. It covers the first ten hours of work. And I *told* you we could use the court-appointed attorney—"

"We're not using a shitty lawyer. Not for this."

"Well, then I don't know what to tell you!" She tossed the sponge back in the sink, giving up. "*You* are the one who's spending three thousand dollars for someone to say 'No comment.'"

Bottles knocked together, and she turned to see him coming to his feet.

"You had *one* job, Jodi—stay out of trouble. Just one job to do and you fucked that up perfectly."

"One job? Seriously? Don't talk to me about 'one job.'" She was done. Jodi moved toward her room, leaving the dishes for tomorrow. "And don't pretend like that wasn't all my *college* money that *you* decided to put toward this lawyer—"

“*Your* college money? *Your* money?” He stepped forward, swaying. “You didn’t earn a dime of that—Hey! Don’t walk away from me!”

She bent to grab her bag just as a current of air buzzed past her ear—then a crack and crash against the hallway wall. Jodi curled into herself, shoulders to her jaw, elbows tucked in tight. A beer bottle lay in shards at her feet, golden liquid pouring onto the rug.

He’d thrown it at her head.

Jodi didn’t turn around—didn’t want to hope for an apologetic face that wouldn’t be there. She ran for her bedroom door, slammed it shut, and locked it. She grabbed her desk chair and shoved it under the door handle, too, an extra precaution she’d begun taking last year.

Panting, she stared at the door, listening to his heavy footfalls coming closer. The doorknob rattled, and she jumped.

“You can’t talk to me that way in my own house!”

“You can’t throw things at me!” She backed away to the other side of her bed. “You promised you wouldn’t do that again.”

She hoped it would jog his memory. She hoped he would go quiet and remember the bruise on her shoulder, the sound of her crying behind her bedroom door.

But it didn’t.

“You’re being an entitled little brat. Spending way too much time with the rich kids, now you think you’re one, too.”

Jodi pulled her phone out of her pocket. When he got like this, he didn’t give up. He wouldn’t just go back to the game. He’d come back to her door every hour and pound and pound until maybe he broke it down. She hit the first number in her Favorites list and listened to the tone ring while her father ranted in broken sentences.

Zack knew. Zack knew that if she called him in the middle of the night, he needed to get there fast. He knew how to park two houses away, run up to her bedroom window, and unlatch the screen. He knew how to help her down from the outside when her short legs couldn’t reach the dirt behind the bushes. He knew how to make her smile and forget as soon as they were buckled and driving down the street. He knew not to ask.

“*Yo, this is Zack. Leave me a message.*”

She ended the call and tried again, her eyes locked on her bedroom door. There was a thump and a grunt. He’d tried to shove it open with his

shoulder.

““Lo?” came a muffled voice through the phone.

Her heart squeezed in relief. She whispered, “I’m sorry, I need you to come.”

She could count five heartbeats in the pause.

“Dillon?”

Jodi blinked at her wall. “Julian? Where’s Zack?”

“He’s fucking passed out, Dillon.” She could hear him sitting up, his voice groggy. “It’s like, three in the morning.”

“It’s not even one A.M. Can you wake him up?”

“Who are you talking to?” Her dad’s voice came from the other side of the door. She hoped it didn’t carry through the phone.

“Wake him up? Are you serious?”

“Just wake him up! He needs to—He’s supposed to pick me up.”

The doorknob rattled. “Jo, I’m gonna break down this door if you don’t answer me.”

“He forgot to pick you up?” Julian’s confused voice asked.

“No, I just ... Just wake him up and tell him I called.” She ended the call.

Zack knew. Zack knew not to ask.

“JO!”

“I’m not talking to anyone! Go watch your game. I’m going to bed.” She turned off her desk lamp and stood in the quiet darkness.

“We’re not done, Jo!”

“Good night!” She listened as the doorknob rattled again. A shoulder shoved against the door, hard.

Jodi could wait. She could lay in bed and stare at the door, hoping it wouldn’t budge. She could pray that he had more beer to blind him into a stupor. Or pray he had none, and that he’d sober up within a few hours.

Jodi could call Mrs. Burns. But she’d call the police.

Jodi could call the police. But they’d cite her dad. Or take her away until her eighteenth birthday. Only three more months of this.

Jodi could get out. She could punch the window screen out, tumble into their bushes, and go. Her bag was still in the living room with her wallet. She could walk. She could call an Uber. She could show up on Lucy’s doorstep, the closest of their houses. It was a Saturday night. Surge pricing.

Could she make it there on the ten dollars in her bank account? If her card was declined by the Uber app, she could find a number for a cab company and take it to Zack's house. Ask him for cash.

It was quiet outside her door, aside from the echoes of the television in the living room.

Jodi could wait. She waited ten minutes, standing in the dark behind her bed, like it was a dragon that could protect her if the door crashed open.

Maybe Zack would come. It took five minutes max to get from his house to Jodi's. Maybe she just had to wait for a tap at her window and a sympathetic pair of blue eyes.

Her father's fist pounded on her bedroom door, shaking the hinges. Jodi held her phone against her chest and stood frozen.

"I don't know when you decided you were too good for me, but it *stops today!* You hear me? You open this door, or I'll smash through it and drag you out here—"

Jodi turned to her bedroom window. Slowly, she unscrewed the security latch. Her father was hissing threats beyond the wall, prowling like a caged bear. She tucked her phone snugly into her jeans and quietly slid the window open. She pulled her desk over a few inches and crawled on top of it.

There was a thudding, metal against stone or wood. Over and over. Something slamming down on her doorknob, trying to dislodge it.

The screen on the window wouldn't give with a push. She tried to remember how Zack did it. Applying pressure to the top two corners she shoved with all her strength. The screen popped, falling down into the bushes with a messy crash. Jodi stood on her desk, slipped one leg through the window, and let her torso follow. Her palms were sweating as she gripped the top of the sill, leaning herself far enough out. Bracing herself on the ledge, she pulled her leg through and closed her eyes as she tumbled.

Leaves, spiky branches, cobwebs. Her legs were tangled, but she twisted onto her feet. She squeezed through the bush and heard her doorknob break.

She didn't pause to close the window. Her legs started running, her head turned over her shoulder, waiting for her father's red face to appear through the open window—

She slammed into something. Arms came up to her elbows and Jodi jerked back.

“Whoa.” Julian steadied her. “Did you just—fall out of your window?”

Jodi stared at him, slack-jawed. Her pulse was still racing, urging her elsewhere. “What are you doing here?”

“You needed to be picked up?” He lifted a brow at her, like *she* was the crazy one.

“Where’s *Zack*?”

Julian shook his head. “Dillon, he’s drunk as fuck. Completely gone to the world.”

The sound of the front door opening swung her around, and she couldn’t help but stumble back into Julian as her father stomped out and stopped dead in his tracks.

“Who are you? Get the hell away from my daughter.” His voice was rough, his eyes unfocused. He was in sweatpants and a stained undershirt. Any hopes Jodi had of Julian Hollister never finding out her family secret evaporated.

She opened her mouth, ready to ease the situation until her dad would let her get in the truck parked in front of the house. Her voice croaked.

“Mr. Dillon!” Julian suddenly stepped out from behind her, walking closer to her dad. “Good to see you again.” He pointed to himself. “Julian. Jodi and I go to school together. I’m friends with Zack.”

Jodi watched in astonishment as Julian slipped easily into a character she didn’t recognize. All smiles and careful approach. Almost Zack-like.

Her dad narrowed his eyes at him, gaze flicking once to Jodi before asking, “Are you fucking my daughter?”

He barked a laugh and muttered, “She wishes. No, I was just coming by to—Hey, is that today’s game? Oregon State v. Cal?” Julian cocked his thumb toward the inside.

Jodi watched her dad nod, shaking his thoughts loose. “Yeah. Third quarter, 0 to 34.”

“Has Oregon’s coach pulled his head out of his ass long enough to get that left tackle off the field?” Julian laughed, slipping his hands into his pockets. Her dad smiled.

“You wanna come in and finish it?”

“Rain check? I was actually gonna pick Jodi up for a beer run. Can I bring you back something?”

Jodi's legs were numb as her dad's eyes passed over her, standing stock-still on the lawn, twigs and spiderwebs all over.

"Corona. I'm all out."

She waited for him to realize why he was all out. She didn't know if she wanted him to remember that he threw a full beer bottle at her head or not.

"You got it. We'll be back in ten minutes."

Julian swung his keys around his finger. The *beep beep* unlocking the truck was too loud on the silent street. Like testing fate.

Jodi stumbled to the passenger door. She climbed inside and stared down at her lap as Julian pulled away from the curb. The knees of her jeans were torn now. It wasn't until they'd turned the corner that she finally let herself breathe.

They passed the closest liquor store that didn't check IDs too closely, and Jodi was relieved that Julian didn't intend to keep his promise. She stared out the window as they ignored each other, her eyes pricking with embarrassment.

She'd only told two people how bad her dad got, and one of them was dead. Emily had pressed her, asking more and more prying questions about Jodi's mom, why she spent so many nights with the Thrashers, why she looked so tired on Mondays.

The first and only other time he'd thrown a bottle at her had been last year. She didn't know if he remembered it the next morning, but they'd tiptoed around each other for months.

Emily wouldn't stop asking about the bruise. Not one other person saw it, but Emily did.

"It's tequila, for my dad."

Jodi was pulled out of her thoughts by Julian's voice. She fought the urge to look at him.

"Thinks he's a connoisseur of tequila or something."

She pressed her eyes closed. The last thing she wanted was Julian Hollister's sympathy. It was bad enough that he knew about it at all. Couldn't they have just never spoken of it again?

"He's only hit me a few times though," he said softly, and Jodi felt her skin go still. "When I've stolen some out of his liquor cabinet. When I flunked precalc. I was actually pretty pleased to be hospitalized after the

drive-in. If I'd totaled my truck without dislocating my shoulder and breaking two ribs..." He chuckled.

Jodi's gaze slid over to him. His knuckles were white around the steering wheel.

"He doesn't hurt me," she whispered in the silence, and though it wasn't the full truth, it was close enough.

"He just scares you," Julian said.

Jodi pressed her lips together and turned to face the window again. They were headed back to Zack's house. He parked the truck and Jodi slid out.

They moved around the side of the house in silence, toward the pool house. When she found Zack passed out on the couch, a jolt of disappointment and anger passed through her. She'd called, and he hadn't come.

She didn't even notice the liquor bottle or beer cans on the table until Julian started gathering them.

"Leave them. It's fine," she said. "I'll take the bed in back, if that's okay."

He nodded and settled on the couch as she headed down the hall. She curled her hands into fists and stared at the window that looked out over the pool until the sky turned orange.

★ ★ ★

In the morning, Zack smiled at her sleepily and asked her when she came over. Jodi sat in the corner of the couch, watching them play video games until finally Zack offered to drive her home.

She said nothing to him about it.

When she got home, the dishes were washed, the bottles recycled, and her dad smiled at her through his headache and asked if she wanted pancakes.

# Chapter Fourteen

NOVEMBER

Ignoring Julian Hollister was like a competitive sport to her. Fortunately, *he* was a gold medalist in ignoring Jodi Dillon. They still shared anatomy class together, but other than that, they didn't see each other. That didn't mean out-of-sight-out-of-mind for her though.

She didn't like that he knew a piece of her that only Zack was supposed to know. She didn't like that he slithered into that cheery, charismatic guy at the exact right moment—only to disappear and never be seen again. She didn't like that she knew something about his dad and he knew something about hers. She didn't want him thinking about her like she was thinking about him.

*He's only hit me a few times though.*

Jodi shook herself out of her trance and focused on the sway of the school bus, keeping an eye out for her stop.

On the right side of the aisle, four rows up, Hannah Mills sat rigid in her seat, staring forward.

Another thing Jodi was ignoring.

Rubbing her thumb over her tingling left hand, Jodi stared out the window, watching the trees blur.

When the bus stopped for her, she squeezed her way down the aisle, waiting for two other kids in her neighborhood to step out first.

Just as she was passing her, Hannah Mills stood up and Jodi almost jumped backward two rows.

Hannah's eyes were deep blue with dark circles under them. She stared at Jodi with an expressionless face as she held out an envelope. "My mom

wanted me to give you this.”

Jodi stared, heart pounding. She snapped her attention to the doors at the front of the bus. She felt every eye on them.

“Thank you.” Jodi slipped the envelope in her jeans back pocket and stumbled down the stairs. On the curb, she turned to look at the bus windows. Blue eyes followed her as the bus turned the corner.

Jodi’s legs felt like jelly as she finished the walk home. The mail was splayed out over the floor when she opened the door, and her eyes landed on a letter from the courthouse.

Her heart sank. This was it. She was being charged. Indicted or whatever. They’d taken so much longer to send the arraignment letter to her, and she didn’t know what that meant.

She dropped her bag and stared at the offending envelope, letting the Millses’ letter drift from her mind. Her dad was in Oregon. He’d be back later that night. But she couldn’t just stare at this mail marked *IMPORTANT* for the rest of the evening.

Jodi searched her contacts for Miranda’s number. She picked up on the second ring.

“I think I have my arraignment papers.”

Miranda sighed and told Jodi to come by. Jodi picked up her book bag, stuffed the envelope in the front flap, and headed to the bus stop again.

She’d been to Miranda’s office once before when she and her dad had the consultation and set up the retainer. She sat on the edge of the oversized armchair Miranda had for visitors, and tugged open the envelope. Passing it over the desk, she sat on her hands and waited.

Miranda’s brows knitted together as she read, and Jodi’s heart sank. Was there another charge being added? Was there another interview scheduled? Her mind spun through stupid scenarios, like if they found out that page of notes was missing from the school counselor’s box.

“So ... Good news first, I guess,” Miranda said, and Jodi sat up straighter. “This doesn’t seem like you’re being charged.”

Jodi felt like she was underwater. “What? Have they dropped charges against the others, too? Zack and Paige—?”

“This only pertains to you.” She passed the letter over the table to her as she said, “You’re being subpoenaed as a witness to the prosecution of Zackary Thrasher, Lucy Reed, Paige Montgomery, and Julian Hollister.”

Jodi stared at her, not daring to look down at the letter, not daring it to exist.

“What does that mean?”

“It means they think your friends are guilty, and maybe they think you’ll be the one to break.”

She wasn’t just underwater. She was sinking.

*Jodi, have you ever worried that you were going to be “Thrashed?”* Detective Harding had been setting her up for this moment, picking at her, opening scabs and digging her fingers into the wound.

“Do I have to?” Jodi asked in a small voice.

Miranda nodded. “If they go to court, you may be called to testify. Even if they don’t go to court, you will be interviewed again. Possibly often.”

Jodi tried to imagine it—a courtroom of her classmates and friends, a lawyer asking her questions.

“Your friend Zack is the big fish, most likely. He’s eighteen, it’s his name on the group. It’s possible if they don’t have enough on the others, they can accept plea deals. I don’t know.”

Jodi clenched her hand into a fist. She wouldn’t let that happen. She could fight to prove her friends’ innocence.

“Now,” Miranda began slowly, “since you are no longer a person of interest, you could decide you no longer need a lawyer. That’s fine with me. I’ll need to talk to your guardian, but we could end our contract and refund your dad the rest of the retainer. If you do feel you’d still like some counsel, I can stay on.”

“I think ... I think my dad will want the money back. I’m sorry, I really like you and everything,” Jodi finished weakly, like she was breaking up with Miranda.

“Of course.” Miranda raised her hands in friendly surrender. “I know finances are tight. I’ll alert your dad.” She made a note in her file. “If you ever need to talk something out, I can offer a ten-minute call, free of charge. If you do need a lawyer at the interviews, we would just start up again.”

When she left Miranda’s office (after an awkward hug Jodi had instigated), it wasn’t until she was on the bus, reviewing the letter, that she remembered the Millses’ card in her back pocket.

She ripped open the bent envelope with her name scrawled across the front in Maureen’s handwriting. A sunflower decorated the front of the

card, and inside was filled with tidy lettering.

Dear Jodi,

My heart has been breaking for you as this portion of the case has dragged on. We were advised to reach out to no one. Now that we're convinced the district attorney won't press charges against you, I can finally offer you an invitation to come by whenever you'd like. I'd love to talk more about Emily with you, and formally apologize for any stress this investigation has caused you. You are guilty of nothing in our hearts.

Any time you'd like to stop by, please do.

Maureen, Robert, and Hannah

Jodi gripped the card between her sweating fingertips. The one thing she could do—that no one else could—was recover Emily's cell phone. If it was where she'd claimed her "special hiding place" was, then Jodi could get there.

She got off at the next stop and transferred to the bus headed to 35th Street.

★ ★ ★

Jodi walked up to the small, two-story house that was shoved between other small, two-story houses. A Subaru took up the narrow driveway, and the welcome mat read *Here Lives a Happy Family*. The last time Jodi was here, there were ambulances parked on the lawn.

She swallowed and rang the bell. In the heartbeats that followed, Jodi imagined Emily greeting her with wide and eager blue eyes. When Mrs. Mills pulled open the door with a kind "Jodi, how good to see you," she realized she had no plan.

"Hi, Mrs. Mills. Hannah gave me your card."

Maureen smiled graciously, inviting her in with a wave. Jodi seated herself on the couch. The living room was an explosion of floral. Floral

upholstery, framed flower needlepoint. Where there weren't flowers, there were crosses and framed Christian platitudes.

"Is Mr. Mills home, too? I'd like to thank him," she said.

"Robert is on his way home from Bible study."

She didn't know Robert Mills aside from passing greetings. She knew he worked for a software company.

"Please tell him I said hello then." Jodi was doing her best impersonation of Zack. "How is Hannah liking New Helvetia? I don't get to see her as much as I'd like."

"Oh, you're sweet. Hannah is always talking about you—how you go out of your way to be kind to her."

Jodi's arms felt weighted with lead. Hannah had told Ms. George, the wellness counselor, the same thing. She tried to smile. "She's a nice girl," she said, croaking. "Is she doing homework?" Jodi turned her eyes upstairs to where Hannah's bedroom was.

"Oh, she's still at school. A study group." Maureen waved her hand dismissively.

Jodi sat frozen. Hannah had been on the bus home with her an hour and a half ago. She forced a smile.

"I hope it wouldn't be too much of an imposition, but ... I was wondering if Emily's bedroom is still as it was? I would love to have a moment to pay my respects to her in her own space."

It was dumb. It was presumptuous. It wouldn't work.

Jodi's breath was caught in her throat as Maureen stared at her. Did she know what Jodi was up to?

"That's very thoughtful of you, Jodi," Maureen said. Her voice was soft, but her eyes still unreadable. "Yes, let me take you."

Maureen Mills stood from the couch. Jodi followed her up the stairs, still unsure if this was going to work. At the landing, Jodi faced down the slightly ajar bathroom door—the room Emily had died in. The room where her cell phone was hidden. Maureen turned right, and Jodi followed.

Emily's bedroom was at the front of the house. An oak tree extended toward her window, with a branch the perfect height for someone to sneak out on. The only reason Jodi knew it was because Zack had invited Emily to get drunk and high with them in the park one night, and Emily had to sneak out after midnight. Jodi, Julian, Lucy, and Paige had watched begrudgingly

as Emily Mills slipped out of her window with Zack's careful guidance. She wasn't a very athletic girl, but if Zack Thrasher asked her to do anything, she was suddenly an Olympian.

A sign on the door with *EMILY* in puffy lettering greeted them. Maureen pushed the door open, and Jodi found Emily's bedroom exactly as it had been when she'd first seen it. She'd been suckered into two or three study sessions at the Millses' house that had quickly devolved into Emily asking about Zack.

Maureen hovered at the doorframe, and Jodi's mind had just started running through the ways she could ask to be alone when Maureen said, "I'll let you have some time."

Relief swam in her. "Thank you, Mrs. Mills. I won't move anything, I swear."

She waved her hand and sniffed. "That's fine. I'm making a pork roast for dinner, if you'd like to stay. We'd love to have you."

Jodi would rather throw herself out the window. "That's very kind. I'll check with my dad."

Smiling, Maureen turned, slipped down the hallway, and down the stairs. Jodi stood in Emily's room, waiting an appropriate amount of time. She'd pretend to lose control of her emotions and say she needed to visit the bathroom to get ahold of herself.

As she waited, she wondered if there was anything in this room worth looking at. The police would have done a full search, taking any electronics, any notebooks. Jodi's eyes passed over the desk. Just behind the small table lamp, a picture was taped to the wall. She moved closer.

It was the same fabricated picture that had flashed on the screens at the vigil—the picture of Jodi from Tahoe edited together with a smiling Emily. Maybe Emily had been the one to Photoshop it.

Pressing her thumbs under her eyes to make them red, Jodi snuck out of Emily's room and toward the bathroom. When no one stopped her, she slipped inside and closed the door, turning the lock.

A strange sensation swept over her skin, sinking down, down into her blood. Jodi stared at the bathtub against the far wall. It had a showerhead attached to the tiles on the right, a small window above the tub facing the street.

She jumped into action, desperate to locate the phone and stop imagining a body in the tub, pink prom dress pouring over the sides. Opening the cabinets under the sink, she pressed against the boards, hoping one would pop and reveal a separate space. No luck. She closed the toilet seat and balanced on top, stretching to look into a vent at the ceiling. Her fingernails couldn't quite get the screws to turn, but the flashlight on her phone didn't show anything hiding inside.

Standing on the toilet seat, she stopped to survey the bathroom. She placed her hands on her hips and wondered, *where would I hide something?*

There were no other cabinets, no other vents, no floorboards to pry up. Tilting her head down and rubbing her temples, she felt time running down.

Then she saw it. Behind the toilet—one of the tiles was missing grout.

Jodi stepped down and knelt. It was behind the tank, completely hidden from sight, but if she pressed just slightly on the corner—

The tile popped out.

She grabbed it before it tumbled down and shattered. Laying the loose tile on the floor with shaking fingers, Jodi turned her attention to the small hole in the wall. She reached inside, and her fingers closed on something shaped like a cell phone. When she pulled it out, Emily's bright pink phone case greeted her. She let out a tight breath.

Emily hid her phone here before she died. She'd told Jodi that no one knew about this space. For some reason, she didn't want anyone to be able to find her phone.

Jodi tried the power button, waiting for a burst of light from the screen, and gasped when it happened. She looked to the bathroom door, hoping she still had time. Waiting for Emily's screen to open was torture.

Should she take it with her? Jodi wavered. She had already stolen a file from the counselor's box. If she was ever found with Emily's cell phone on her ...

No, what she wanted was to figure out what Julian had texted Emily that day, maybe glance through a few things, and turn it off again. *If* there was something to help Zack, she could possibly "remember" that Emily hid things in the bathroom, and tell the police. But that would open up a huge can of worms for all the other things she couldn't verify in the next five minutes.

Glancing at the dark opening in the wall, Jodi's eyes caught on something else. A book maybe. Leaving the phone to boot up, she dropped to her knees again and reached for it.

She pulled out a worn leather notebook. Jodi opened to the first page and found Emily's handwriting:

**AUG. 17, 2023**

**NEW JOURNAL FOR A NEW HIGH SCHOOL. I'M GLAD TO BE LEAVING SAC HIGH, BUT I HATE STARTING OVER.**

Jodi gasped. She flipped forward, finding entries all throughout the school year.

**AUG. 21, 2023**

**I DON'T THINK THERE EVER WAS A BOY AS PERFECT AS ZACK THRASHER. I WANT TO WRITE POETRY ABOUT HIM. REALLY BAD POETRY THAT I'LL NEVER SHOW ANYONE (ESPECIALLY HIM) BUT I WANT TO WRITE IT ANYWAYS. I WANT TO USE METAPHORS TO PERFECTLY CAPTURE THE SHADE OF BLUE IN HIS EYES, AND THE TEXTURE OF HIS HAIR. I DON'T EVEN THINK HE STYLES IT. IT'S JUST ... PERFECT.**

*Another journal?*

Jodi turned to the doorway, listening. Could she take this? What would she do with it?

Making a split-second decision, Jodi pulled out her own cell phone and opened the camera. She took pictures with one hand, flipping pages with the other, only stopping when she saw her name.

**OCT. 9, 2023**

**I GOT TO SPEAK TO JODI TODAY! I JUST SAT DOWN NEXT TO HER IN THE LIBRARY AND SHE TALKED TO ME!**

Jodi picked up her pace, switching to video and hoping that the image quality was clear. She got through December when Emily's phone on the bathroom counter buzzed awake. She kept going, turning pages.

Jodi flipped to the end of the journal, looking for the last month of Emily's life, hoping she could find something to help her friends.

But it cut off in April. Jodi's brows knitted together. She flipped through every page, and couldn't find a single date in May. Why?

Jodi slid through the April pages, trying to find something about Emily wanting to kill herself in that month. A knock on the bathroom door jarred her. She dropped her phone.

"Jodi?" Maureen said. "Are you alright?"

She grabbed her phone, turned off the video, and said tightly, "Yeah, I'm just ... I got overwhelmed."

"Oh, sweetheart, it's okay."

Glancing at Emily's cell phone, Jodi made a choice. She came to find out what was on the cell phone. She shoved the journal back into the hole in the wall and jerked to her feet. "Give me just one second to finish up."

She opened Emily's phone—Mr. Mills wouldn't let them have passcodes—and went to her texts. The phone buzzed again with new notifications, and Jodi hurried to turn off the sound. Six voicemails. All from Hannah in the past few months. Jodi ignored them and scrolled through the texts.

She found her thread with Zack, checking just the last few messages. All from Emily. Sending him memes or "this made me think of you."

Jodi's fingers were shaking as she searched for Julian. Nothing.

She typed Julian's name into the search—

Maureen knocked again.

"Sorry. Just washing my hands."

Nothing turned up for Julian. Jodi knew the first three digits of his number, and typed that in.

Nothing.

She switched on the taps, closed the messages on Emily's phone, and powered it down. She didn't wait for it to turn off before shoving it into the wall and replacing the tile.

She pushed her fingers under the water, dragged them down her cheeks, and opened the door.

"Sorry," she said weakly, and then her words choked off.

Robert Mills was standing at the door, staring at her over the rims of his glasses. His eyes flicked behind her into the bathroom. "My wife went to

make you tea.”

“Yeah,” Jodi squeaked. “I just got emotional, thinking about Emily...” Jodi let her staggered breathing and shaking limbs tell the lie for her.

He didn’t respond—didn’t move. He examined her like she was a problem to solve. Jodi’s heart pounded as he stepped to the side and let her out of the bathroom.

“Are you staying for dinner?” he asked. There was no kindness in the offer. Almost like he didn’t want her to accept.

“Thank you, no. I have to get home.” She stumbled toward the stairs. Maureen was calling for her from the kitchen.

She extricated herself and thanked them, glancing up to Robert Mills, still at the top of the stairs. Maureen hugged her goodbye, and Jodi left as fast as she could without running.

Darting to the bus stop, she couldn’t stop thinking about Robert Mills’s expression when she opened the door. Like he didn’t want her there at all. It wasn’t until she was on the bus that she let herself think about what she’d found.

If Emily’s journal was hidden in the bathroom wall ... then what did the police have?

Case No. 4512420

Excerpt from the journal of Emily Mills

Entered into evidence 6.08.2024 by Det. Chelsea Harding

**Nov. 11, 2023**

**ZACK THRASHER INVITED ME TO HANG OUT WITH THEM!!!  
OMG I CAN'T STOP SMILING!!!**

**I KNEW IT WOULD HAPPEN!! I JUST NEEDED TO BE PATIENT AND I WAS. OMG. WE'RE GOING TO THE ROSE GARDEN IN THE PARK BY MY HOUSE—AFTER MIDNIGHT. I GUESS THEY LIKE TO GO THERE TO SMOKE AND DRINK. I THINK IT'S REALLY DANGEROUS THOUGH BECAUSE THERE CAN BE DESTITUTE PEOPLE AND DRUG ADDICTS, AND A LOT OF HOUSES ARE AROUND THE PARK, SO ANYONE COULD CALL THE COPS. BUT I GUESS THEY DO IT ALL THE TIME? I DUNNO. ISN'T THAT WEIRD? THAT I'VE BEEN LIVING IN THIS HOUSE SINCE I WAS BORN AND ZACK THRASHER HAS BEEN HANGING OUT PRACTICALLY ACROSS THE STREET FOR YEARS? I FEEL LIKE THAT'S FATE OR SOMETHING.**

**HE ASKED ME TODAY IF I COULD SNEAK OUT OF MY HOUSE AND MEET THEM. I'VE NEVER DONE IT BEFORE, AND MY DAD WOULD ABSOLUTELY KILL ME IF HE CAUGHT ME, BUT I TOLD ZACK THERE'S A TREE NEAR MY WINDOW. AND THEN**

**AND THEN**

**AND THEN HE SAID, "OH, I DON'T WANT YOU TO HURT YOURSELF. WHY DON'T I COME HELP YOU CLIMB OUT?"**

**MY FACE TURNED BRIGHT RED. LIKE ZACK THRASHER WOULD KNOW WHERE MY BEDROOM WAS????? OMG. SO I WAS LIKE, "YEAH COOL." SO I'M SITTING HERE IN MY BEDROOM, AT 11:30 JUST WAITING FOR ZACK THRASHER'S**

**FACE TO POP UP IN MY WINDOW LIKE FREAKING PETER PAN. OH GOD I'M SO EXCITED.**

**I'M GOING TO MAKE LUCY REED LIKE ME TONIGHT. THAT'S MY #1 GOAL. (BESIDES GETTING ZACK TO "TAKE ME SOMEWHERE PRIVATE" OF COURSE HA). IF THEY OFFER ME WEED, I'M GONNA TAKE IT. I DON'T WANT TO LOOK LIKE A DORK. OMG I CAN'T WAIT TO WRITE ALL ABOUT IT TOMORROW.**

## Chapter Fifteen

Jodi sat on her bed that evening going through the pictures and video she'd taken of Emily's journal.

Emily's real journal? Could she be sure of that?

Even as she looked over what was clearly Emily's handwriting, Jodi still couldn't be positive that the police had a fake. Maybe this one was the fake.

Jumping off her bed, Jodi sent the pictures and video to her computer so she could examine them better. She had been flipping pages so fast that a lot of the entries were too blurry to make much out of them.

But just as Jodi could have guessed, Zack's name was everywhere.

*Zack Thrasher invited me to hang out with them!*

*Zack told me he liked my orange Converse!*

*I asked Zack what kind of music he listens to, and I'm going to download absolutely every song by Frank Ocean.*

But nothing was jumping out to her as something that could help Zack or her friends. She wished she'd had the date that Emily said she'd had sex with Zack. She could have flipped the pages right there. Jodi checked the clock. It was almost midnight. She still had a term paper to write. Rubbing her forehead, she went to make coffee in the kitchen.

Her dad was asleep in his chair, snoring over the Food Network. When she'd gotten home from the Millses', she'd shown him the paperwork from the DA's office explaining that she wasn't indicted. He'd breathed a sigh of relief and offered to grab celebratory tacos. He'd returned with a six-pack of Corona as well. Jodi watched TV with him for an hour before excusing herself to her room to go over Emily's journal.

She could at least hope that no more lawyer fees would mean that things between the two of them could return to normal again. As she watched the coffee drip, she tried to decide what to do about her *other* problem.

There were five “Thrashers,” and only four of them were in trouble now. Jodi couldn’t pretend she wasn’t thrilled that she might still have a shot at college, but how could she be happy about that when her friends’ futures were at stake? How was she supposed to break the news to them?

More importantly, how could she hide the subpoena from them?

That night, Jodi dreamt she was in an unfamiliar bathroom, attempting to take a bath, but every time she started the taps, rusty water splashed down. The door was locked from the outside. She screamed for someone to find her, but there was a party happening on the other side of the door. When she got into the tub, clothes on, her left arm was throbbing. She looked down to see why and found a hand holding hers.

She jerked awake, in her own bed. She had no feeling in her left arm. It had been stuck under her shoulder at an odd angle.

She shook feeling into it, but it took hours to feel right.

★ ★ ★

“I’m sharing my birthday with Paige,” Lucy said one morning, after joining Jodi at her locker. “She didn’t get an eighteenth birthday party, so we’ll share it.”

“Okay,” Jodi said. “And she doesn’t think the ground will open up and swallow us into hell if the five of us are in the same place at the same time again?”

“Oh, she does,” Lucy said with a grin. “But it won’t just be the five of us. It’ll still be small, but I’m inviting more people. Do you want me to include Spencer Gordon?”

Jodi shut her locker and blinked at Lucy. “Oh. Uh, yeah, okay.”

Aside from a few waves in the hallway, she hadn’t talked to him this semester. She hadn’t *thought* about him, either, until Julian had brought him up at homecoming.

“Cool,” Lucy said, winking at her before walking off to class.

Upon hearing there was an exclusive Thrashers party being thrown, Reagan Matthews promptly announced a rager at Folsom Lake for the same night. Lucy said it didn't matter to her, but Jodi saw the way her jaw tightened and eyes narrowed every time someone said they were "busy."

It wasn't until Jodi arrived at Lucy's house that she realized Zack had invited Kiera. A short girl with a tiny waist and pretty green eyes was in the kitchen with Zack and Paige, listening to Zack's story with bright interest. Her light brown hair was curled with those beach waves Jodi always failed to get right. She watched as Zack nudged her ribs, and Kiera giggled.

"So," said a voice from just over her shoulder, "what *are* we gonna do?"

Julian sipped from his red cup, eyes on Kiera and Zack.

"Nothing." Jodi swallowed and tore her eyes off them. "It's not our business. That's what got us into this mess."

She remembered the way Emily used to stand at Zack's side and listen to him talk as if he were giving the Sermon on the Mount. It had seemed clear to them then that Zack was being friendly, and Emily was taking things out of context, but now ...

Zack offered Kiera another drink, and she shook her head demurely. He pointed outside, and she agreed, following him closely through the back door.

"He can't sleep with her," she blurted out. Wincing, she turned to Julian. "I mean, like with the case, not because ... of any other reason."

"Sure," he said slyly.

"Seriously though. How old is she?"

He nodded, agreeing with her. "She's a junior."

Jodi shook her head, her hands running through her hair. "Is he stupid enough to do it? Does someone actually need to tell him why hanging out with this girl is a bad idea?"

"I'm handling it." He took a long swig of whatever was in his cup, staring out to the patio where Zack, Kiera, and a few others were in the hot tub.

"Handling it?" She scoffed. "What are you gonna do, seduce her?"

He lifted a brow and looked down at her, almost a full-foot difference in their heights.

Jodi's brow matched his. "Seduce *him*?" she teased.

"The places your mind goes, Dillon, I swear to god..."

He walked away, and Jodi smirked.

Paige was a nervous wreck when Jodi found her in the kitchen. She was able to carry on a conversation, but halfway through, she'd turn and check that the stove burners were off. Jodi caught her counting the number of knives in the block.

In the living room, a few people chatted while the music played from Lucy's parents' stereo system. Lucy's mom and dad had promised to give her some space on her birthday; they were at a hotel tonight.

When Jodi headed toward the couches, she saw that Spencer was already there, chatting with a few guys from school. Spencer was nice enough, and pretty cute. He had curly brown hair and deep-set brown eyes that made him look constantly exhausted, but they brightened when he saw her. He stood up and gave her a little wave.

"Hey," she said, trying for nonchalant. "I don't think we have any classes together this semester."

"Not a one." His cheeks dimpled when he smiled. "Did I hear you're in the school play?"

"No, god no." Jodi laughed. "I'm painting the backdrop."

She told him all about Mrs. Calloway and her dramatic tantrums. Spencer kept his full attention on her, and she felt almost smothered by it. Jodi tried to enjoy herself but she couldn't help it when her gaze drifted to the patio where she could just catch the corner of the hot tub.

When Julian was called into the living room, his gaze swept over Jodi and Spencer on the couch, and the cat-that-got-the-canary grin on his face made her want to lock herself in the garage for the rest of the night.

"Hey!" Julian called out, getting the attention of the whole party, but keeping his eyes locked on Jodi. "Truth or dare time!"

Jodi groaned, watching Julian cut through the room like a shark hunting a minnow until he happily dropped onto the couch across from her and Spencer. She tried to think of any way to excuse herself to go do something else for the next hour, but everyone was coming in from the patio, piling onto the couch cushions.

The game started out easy. A handful of truths later, and Jodi had learned that one of the water polo guys had slept with the girls' softball coach, that Paige cheated on her math final last year, and that one of the girls there had enough cocaine in her purse to get her put away for a long

time. The dares were gradually getting less tame. Lucy had to switch shirts with one of the guys, someone had to eat a raw egg from the fridge, and Julian agreed to strip down, run naked down Lucy's street, and then jump in the pool. (A few of the girls there ran to the window to watch.)

When Julian had climbed out of the pool, slipped back into his shorts, and plopped back down on the couch next to Paige, Jodi was hoping that had been the big finale. But with a clap of his hands and a bellowed "My turn!," Julian drew their attention back. His eyes were locked on her, mischievous and bright. He ran a hand through his wet hair, and Jodi sipped from her water bottle.

"Dillon. Truth or dare?"

She swallowed. Julian knew too many of her secrets already, and some of them she knew he would make her say in front of everyone just to humiliate her.

"Dare."

His brows shot up, and a smile lifted his lips. The murmurs around her indicated that no one thought she'd choose dare. Neither did she. But if the dare was too ridiculous she knew Paige and Lucy would be there to fight it for her, maybe even take her shot for her.

Julian opened his mouth—closed it. Then grinned like the Cheshire cat.

"I dare you to make out with the hottest person here, in your opinion."

Jodi watched him settle back, slinging an arm behind Paige's head on the back of the couch. The group laughed, and the tension ratcheted.

Her skin felt like a rubber band pulled tight. He wanted to see if she'd tell the truth and kiss Zack, thereby embarrassing herself. Or lie and create some false hopes in Spencer by kissing him. She wouldn't look at either of them, afraid of what she'd find.

When she spent too long staring Julian down, someone started to chant "Jodi. Jodi. Jodi" until everyone was joining in, except for Paige, who was smiling softly and jumping at every noise the house made, and Julian, who just smirked at her, waiting.

An idea hit her—there was a way to kill two birds with one stone. She rocked forward onto her knees and crawled to the couch, passing Spencer, passing Zack. Reaching their knees, she pulled herself up to lean over Julian. The room started screaming in joy, watching Jodi Dillon about to choose Julian Hollister as the hottest in the room.

Julian's smile dripped from his lips. His lashes fluttered in shock and his bare chest didn't move.

She smirked at him, swerved right, and grabbed Paige's distracted face. Paige laughed into her mouth as she pressed their lips together, and the room shook in glee. She dropped to the couch, kneeling over Paige.

Jodi opened her eyes to pin Julian with a glare that she hoped read *joke's on you*.

He wasn't laughing. Or cheering. His eyes were glued to her mouth on Paige's. His face had a rosy blush from either the alcohol or the run around the street. He almost looked mad.

Grinning, Jodi finally pulled away, finding Paige almost crying from laughter. Jodi had pulled her mind off her troubles *and* had singled her out as the hottest in the room.

"I said guy," a voice cut over the clapping.

Jodi and Paige looked at Julian. He was definitely mad about something.

"You didn't." Paige shook her head. "You said 'hottest person.' Ha-ha, I win," she said petulantly.

"Gender is a construct!" Lucy yelled, and the room cheered.

Maybe she was high off being the center of attention, or maybe she was just so pleased to have one-upped Julian Hollister at his own game, but Jodi leaned toward him and yelled to the room, "You mad? Were you looking forward to being crowned 'the hottest?'"

The room howled, and Jodi braced herself on Julian's shoulders, leaning toward his mouth. Before she could get far in the game of chicken, he jumped up from the couch, and she tumbled down to where he'd been sitting. The room laughed as Julian stomped away, going to the kitchen for another drink.

Paige pretended to fan herself, and Jodi stole a look at Zack as she righted herself. He was giggling drunkenly into his cup. Kiera was sitting next to him—that's all it took for Jodi's spark of joy to be put out.

Lucy took control of the rioting room. "Alright! Alright! Seeing as I offered to share this party with Paige, I accept someone else being crowned 'hottest in the room' on *my birthday*." They laughed. "Jodi, your turn, babe."

A loud *ding* from the speakers jarred the entire room, the music coming to a quick halt before coming back on. Someone yelled “Jesus!” and Lucy placed her hand on her chest dramatically.

“Sorry, sorry!” Paige said, jumping up. “My phone’s hooked up. Everyone I know is here. Who’s texting me...?” Paige climbed over the people sitting on the floor, heading for the stereo dock across the room.

“Okay,” Jodi said, returning to truth or dare. Her eyes slipped over the circle, looking for someone who hadn’t gone yet. Spencer gave her a shy smile, and she swiftly moved past him to the girl on his right. “Naomi. Truth or dare?”

There was an electric hiss. A choked sound across the room. Jodi looked up in time to see sparks fly from the stereo system, and Paige’s body flew through the air like it was on a string. The *zing* of the speakers as they short-circuited.

Paige landed with a thud against the back of the couch, then disappeared, dropping to the hardwood floor with a smack.

Jodi was on her feet, pushing through everyone else. Lucy yelled out, climbing over the couch, but Julian skidded in on his knees, carefully tugging Paige’s limp body to lay flat. Jodi ran around them to his side.

“Watch it!” Julian shoved her to the other side of him, and she looked up to see sparks flying from the sound system.

People were screaming and crowding, but Jodi didn’t care as Julian’s lifeguard training kicked in. His fingers were on Paige’s pulse, waiting. Waiting. Then without hesitating, he opened her mouth, pinched her nose, and started CPR.

Paige’s chest inflated. Jodi watched it through a fog.

Strange that someone without breath could breathe.

Her eyes snapped up—sound burst into her ears. The room spun back to her. A handful of people pressed up against the far wall, their mouths covered in horror. Zack was leaning over the couch, his phone to his ear—“My friend’s been electrocuted. Send—send help. We’re at ... Oak Lane”—“His gaze swam to Lucy for help. She grabbed the phone and told them the address.

“Yes, we’re starting CPR. They want to know if she’s breathing. Julian?”

He didn’t respond. Just kept pumping her chest with his two hands.

Behind Jodi, Spencer and two others were trying to unplug the speakers without getting shocked. The sparks flew like concert pyrotechnics.

Paige's phone was across the room, lying useless from where it had been flung.

Julian covered her mouth again—the fourth time?—and then pumped her chest.

“They’ll be here in five minutes,” Lucy whispered.

He shook his head and bit back something. Was that not fast enough?

Jodi felt her body deflate, like a balloon with too many punctures.

In the kitchen, a few of the others had started cleaning up the alcohol. Damage control.

Jodi's eyes were blurred with tears. She heard a gasp, and Jodi blinked to clear her vision. Paige took her own breath, and Lucy threw herself over her, sobbing. Julian sat back on his heels, panting. Zack appeared at her side, scrambling to hold Paige's hand.

Jodi slapped away her tears and watched Paige blink twice at the ceiling, drawing in deep breaths.

Paige's hand shot out, wrapping around Jodi's wrist.

Jodi reached to squeeze her back, but Paige's eyes were on her, fierce and intent.

In a voice like crackling fire, Paige whispered to Jodi, “She wants to talk to us.”

## Chapter Sixteen

Paige's fingers were like a vise on Jodi's wrist. Even as others started fussing over Paige, giving her water, placing a pillow under her head, her grip on Jodi remained firm.

The EMTs came a few minutes later. Paige had a blistering electrical burn on her arm and a bump on her head. Half the party had vanished out the back door once Paige woke up, making a run for it before the ambulance arrived.

Paige's parents were called. Then Lucy's. Soon it was just the five of them and the EMTs. They hovered at Paige's side as they laid her on a stretcher, explaining that she had to go to the hospital to have her burn treated. Julian asked if someone could ride in the ambulance with them, and the female EMT looked him up and down, dressed only in his boxer shorts, still wet from the pool. "You all should probably sober up before doing anything."

Jodi stepped forward. "I'm sober. Can I go?"

The woman nodded. They loaded up, and Jodi climbed in, buckling herself awkwardly against the wall.

Paige was propped up, wires sprouting from her like vines. She stared out the back window as the ambulance took off, her skin gray and her eyes empty.

Cheryl Montgomery called Jodi's phone, and Jodi assured her that she was with Paige and that she would wait at the hospital until Cheryl came. They arrived at the hospital and took Paige to a bed in the trauma bay. It was very much, and yet nothing at all, like *Grey's Anatomy*. She took the

chair by Paige's bed and waited as the EMTs filled in the doctors. Paige had to answer tons of questions about illegal drugs, saying every time that she'd only had one puff of a joint with her alcohol.

When the doctors eventually left them alone, Paige pivoted her neck to Jodi, something eerie in the way her head twisted.

"I saw her. She's been trying to talk to us," said Paige, smiling widely like she'd solved a math problem. "Jodi, the pictures. The texts. The *inhaler*. We were right."

She opened her mouth to deny that she was part of a we and thought better of it. "Tell me what you saw."

"I was on the football field or something. It was really, really bright, and I was lying on my back, staring up at the sky..." She blinked twice and turned to Jodi. "That might have been the 'walk toward the light' thing they tell you about."

Jodi nodded. Her fingers were cold as she thought about Paige being so close to that. Being so calm about it now.

"And I looked to my right, and Emily was there, lying in the grass with me. It was so bright, I could hardly see her. She told me not to look at the sun. To look at her. 'It's not time yet,' she said."

Chills crested along Jodi's arms as she remembered the dream she'd had of Emily in the hospital after the drive-in.

"She told me she's been trying to talk, but we're not listening." Paige's eyes were bright. "She said something about safety, like we're not safe? And then I felt like I was ... sinking into the ground, lower and lower, and she leaned over me and said something, like an afterthought. Like it wasn't even for me—"

"What did she say?" Jodi was leaning forward, elbows on knees.

"I'll protect you."

Jodi jerked upright, heart hammering.

"Isn't that strange?" Paige went on. "But then I woke up."

The curtain around Paige's bed flew open with a rattle of clicking plastic rings. Cheryl Montgomery burst in, pushing Paige's hair from her forehead, asking Jodi questions without waiting for answers, screaming for a "damn doctor," ignoring Paige's protests.

On Monday, Paige found Jodi in the art building at lunch. “I want to speak to a medium,” she said with bright eyes.

Jodi chewed her sandwich slowly before swallowing. “The one your aunt goes to?”

Paige nodded. “I want to know what Emily wants. How to get her to stop.”

The Reeds had been very upset to hear that their stereo system’s faulty wiring had almost killed Paige. They apologized profusely and had it inspected immediately. The electrician couldn’t find any reason why Paige had received that shock.

“Who was the text from?” Jodi asked. “The one that made you go get your phone?”

“No clue. It was a different number than before, but I think it’s the same person.” Paige showed Jodi her texts.

189. No context. Just the digits.

“Do you know what it—?”

“One hundred and eighty-nine days since she died,” Paige said, pocketing her phone with a grim expression. “I counted. I called it, and it rang and rang.”

Jodi’s chest felt cold. She took a deep breath. “Have you told Greg? Or your lawyer?”

Paige shrugged. “And say what? ‘Someone is asking about our summer, suggesting hair colors, and sending random numbers?’ It isn’t really threatening taken apart like that.”

Jodi nodded. When she met Paige’s eyes, they were intent.

“Will you come with me to the medium?” Paige said.

Jodi wanted to remind her that the texts could be from anyone, that freak accidents happen. But the words from Paige’s vision rang back to her:

*I’ll protect you.*

Jodi swallowed thickly, and that familiar feeling like she was sinking returned.

“Yeah, I’ll go.”

Paige's aunt Bette had been seeing a medium since she was twenty-two, when her mother died. Paige's mom had thrown herself into work and spin class instead, not understanding her younger sister's need to speak to their mother every two weeks.

Bette brought Jodi into her arms with a tight hug, her long, wavy blond hair just like Paige's. "Paige talks about you all the time, Jodi."

The three of them had lunch at Burr's, where Jodi heard a *lot* of stories about Bette's medium, Nan, and how she accurately predicted 9/11.

"My uncle Rich—he died when I was twelve," Bette said, shaking a sugar packet before ripping it open and dumping it in her iced tea. "He shows up *every time* I see Nan. It's like he's in a waiting room, just hanging out, looking for a window to peek through." Bette rolled her eyes and sucked on her straw.

Jodi picked at her french fries. She'd woken up with a dead arm again. Her left fingers still felt colder than her right, no matter how she warmed them. Hearing Bette talk about reaching out to dead people wasn't helping.

It wasn't that Jodi didn't believe in mediums. Well, maybe she didn't. But she had no reason yet *to* believe. If she was being honest, it was a lot easier to hope that Emily's spirit wouldn't come to them today than hoping it would.

"Now, this session is on me," Bette said, placing a hand over each of theirs from across the booth. She squeezed. "I know you both are concerned about your friend, so I'm glad to introduce you to Nan. She's put my mind at ease about so much over the years. I can't even imagine having a friend die by suicide and leave you with so many questions."

Paige flashed her thin smile. None of the others had agreed to come with them. Julian had a water polo match, and Zack and Lucy were there to support him.

Jodi cleared her throat. "What's it like? What are we supposed to do?"

"Nan told me to only prep you with the basics so as not to muddle your energies," Bette said. "First thing is, don't give her information unless she asks for it. Including Emily's name, okay? She wants to make sure she's talking to the right person, not just who *you* want that person to be. Trust me, Uncle Rich has crashed more of my sessions than I can count."

"But how does Nan communicate what we want to ask Emily?"

“That’s the best part about this spiritual world, darling,” Bette said with a dreamy smile. “Emily is with you. Emily knows already.”



Nan’s salon was nothing like Jodi was expecting. It was far less holistic healing and more family therapist: warm sunlight, sleek modern furniture, and watercolors surrounding a framed Stanford diploma in literature. Nan, herself, was also unexpected—a woman in her fifties with a brown bob and a firm handshake.

“Let me talk a little about what I do.” Nan slipped into the chair across the table from Paige. “I get images, letters of names, sensations—things like that. I’m very often wrong, okay? That’s why I ask you a lot of questions and make sure we’re on the same page. I can’t see the past, I can’t predict the future. But I can get messages from your loved ones.”

Paige nodded quickly, and Jodi watched her fingers fidget under the table.

“What if they don’t want to talk?” Jodi said.

Snapping her eyes to her, Paige said, “She does. She told me.”

“What if she doesn’t show up? That’s all I’m asking.”

Nan nodded and said, “That happens a lot. Maybe the person you were hoping to hear from isn’t ready. That’s okay. There’s a lot we can still discuss today and a lot that can still come up.”

Jodi itched to tell Nan that this wasn’t a lifestyle she intended to nurture.

“Okay,” Paige said. “How do we begin?”

“Well, on my side, it began about ten minutes before you arrived. So no need for a ‘prayer’ or anything.”

Paige sat on the edge of her chair, leaning forward.

“I’m getting a young female. An *E* name.”

“Emily,” Paige all but whispered.

“There’s a couple other energies here as well, but Emily seems real close.” Nan turned to Bette on her left. “You didn’t know Emily when she was alive?”

“No, I never met her.”

“Okay, that makes sense,” Nan said, her eyes turning back to Paige, then sliding over to Jodi. “I just want to check some things, okay? Emily was blond?”

“Yes.”

“And young, about your age?”

Paige nodded.

“Why am I seeing turquoise? Is there anything with turquoise?” Nan looked between them both.

Jodi’s brows drew together. “Her favorite color was pink.”

Paige looked at her sharply, and Jodi flushed.

“No, I’m seeing bright turquoise. Maybe a car? Or a school binder? A favorite jacket? Turquoise or an aquamarine.”

“The only ... the only thing that was aquamarine was my prom dress,” Jodi said.

Nan hummed. “Did you buy the dress together? Did she loan it to you? What’s the significance of the dress?”

Flashing red and blue lights. Her bare feet pressed against the grit of the sidewalk.

“No. She died while I was wearing it.”

Chills crested down her arms. Nan tilted her head to the side, and Jodi could almost envision Emily whispering into her ear.

“She wants you to know she was with you,” Nan said. “She was with you—was it outside? A residential area?”

Jodi nodded mutely.

“She was there.” Nan smiled, as if this was the comfort Jodi came to seek. “She—”

Nan cut off, tilting her head again and listening. She rolled her shoulders back, and leaned her elbows on the table.

“Hm. There’s someone else here. Emily and this person have very loud voices so I’m just trying to parse through what I’m getting.”

“Is it Uncle Rich?” Bette rolled her eyes. “Rich! Not today!” she yelled at the ceiling. “Today is for Paige, okay?”

“No, it’s female.”

Paige looked at Jodi with a question in her eyes. “And it’s not Emily?” Paige asked.

“No, it’s separate. Emily is still here, but this other person ... Female. The letter *H*.”

Bette and Paige squinted at each other, thinking, before turning to Jodi. “Is it your mom, Jodi?”

A flash of frozen shock passed over her before she shook her head. “My mom’s name was Josephine.”

Nan continued, “Anyone else in your family who has passed?”

“My family, specifically?”

“Yeah, the energy is coming from you, Jodi.”

Jodi blinked at her. “Um ... two grandparents. My—my father’s mother was named Helene.”

Paige and Bette swung their eyes to Nan expectantly.

“Hm. I’m getting younger than grandparent.”

“She died young. She died around thirty.”

Nan pursed her lips. “Was her death violent in any way?”

Jodi froze in her chair. “Violent?”

“Was it murder or a painful accident?”

Jodi shook her head dumbly. “I—I don’t know.”

Nan shook out her shoulders. “Okay. Let me see what else—” Nan cut herself off again, tilting her head like listening for rainstorms in the distance. “A bathroom?”

Paige drew in a shaking breath. “Yes. Emily died in a bathroom.”

Jodi felt like she was rooted to the chair. Was Emily upset that Jodi went into that very bathroom?

“Okay ... Maybe we’re back to Emily. I’m getting...” Nan’s eyes flicked to Jodi. “I’m getting a similar message from the energies here. But let me parse it. What about flowers? Flowers at funerals? Flowers in a home?”

“Emily’s parents’ house is covered in floral patterns,” Jodi jumped in.

Paige nodded quickly. “We—we didn’t attend her funeral.”

Nan frowned, then reached up to rub her eyes. “Someone is holding out a rose. Do roses mean anything to either of you?”

They shook their heads.

“Is there a location associated with roses? Maybe a florist shop. Or a place you received roses? They are really pushing this idea of *going* to the roses.”

Jodi's mind flashed to the corsage that Julian supposedly ordered for Emily, but that was odd. Why go to the florist?

Paige almost jumped out of her chair to answer, "The rose garden. In East Sac. We went there with Emily. We—we had a fun night."

Nan nodded, following that string. "There's a big energy here that believes that place—maybe the rose garden—is safe. It's a safe place."

Paige's breath was quick, and Jodi could almost see the way her feet wanted to bolt there now. But Jodi didn't get it. Was something in the rose garden? Something left behind that they needed?

"Okay, this is weird." Nan rubbed her temples. "Emily's energy is coming in fits and starts. It's like ... it's like electricity."

"What does that mean?" Paige whispered.

"It's ... I've never felt it like that before. She's happy though. Emily is really pleased about something. It's like there's a bulb turning on and off."

"That's—" Jodi cut herself off, but Paige nodded for her to continue. "She might be trying to talk to us. I think she controls lights."

Nan narrowed her eyes at Jodi, opening her mouth like she was going to deny the possibility of that, when suddenly her expression dropped, melting away. Her face was blank as she read something from the beyond.

"There's another presence joining us, but..." Nan swallowed. "I don't think we should talk to him yet."

"Uncle Rich!" Bette yelled. "Go. Away!"

"No, we're not going to talk to him yet," Nan repeated, and Jodi had the faint impression that she wasn't saying it to them. "Emily is very pleased about something. She thinks ... things will be better."

Paige's breath rattled out of her. "Better?"

Nan was pale as she nodded. "Not everyone here agrees. But Emily thinks you're better off now."

Relief rolled off Paige in waves. She leaned back in her seat and ran a hand through her hair.

"You said there's a new presence?" Jodi asked. "What do they want?"

Nan cleared her throat and stood. She grabbed two business cards from the plastic holder on the side table.

"I think ... I think we need to stop for now." She slid a business card to Jodi and one to Paige. "There's something ... We just need to stop."

"Stop?"

“But if you’d like to speak with me this evening, or tomorrow, I will happily continue the conversation.”

Jodi looked down at the business card. *Psychic Medium—Nan Herrington—Readings for \$85*. She wasn’t going to be able to afford to talk to her again.

“Thank you so much, Nan,” Bette said, like this was normal to stop a session after ten minutes. She stood and shook her hand. Paige did the same, chirping happily about what a wonderful experience this was—exactly what she wanted.

Jodi stood slowly. “I’ll meet you outside,” she said to them. “I just want to ask one more question, if I can.”

Nan smiled wanly and nodded.

Paige and Bette exited, talking about fro-yo.

As soon as the door closed, Nan grabbed Jodi’s arm, nails sinking into her like claws.

“Are you not safe?”

Jodi stared at her, breath frozen in her chest. “What?”

“Every single energy in this room wants to protect you, Jodi.”

“Me?”

“Are you in danger in some way? Everyone here is *very* loud and *no one* likes each other, but they agree on you. Emily is...” Nan shook her head. “I don’t like her energy. She didn’t want to talk to Paige at all. She barely wanted to use me. She just wanted to be near you, Jodi.”

Nan’s fingers on her arm—her left arm—drew away the sensation in Jodi’s fingertips.

“She rides very closely on the lines between our worlds, and I know that doesn’t mean anything to you, but I wouldn’t be surprised if you felt her presence more fully than a usual spirit.”

Jodi’s throat was dry. She nodded. “She’s been ... I think she wants to kill us.” Saying it out loud pushed tears out of her eyes that she hadn’t known she was holding back.

“No.” Nan lifted a warm hand to Jodi’s cheek. “At least, not *you*.”

Something flashed in Nan’s hazel eyes—clear blue skies after a rain—and then it was gone. Nan dropped her hands from Jodi’s skin. Her left arm felt dead. Just a limb.

“Call me,” Nan said, pointing to the card in Jodi’s other hand. “I can’t talk about why now. But if you have questions this evening, I want you to call me.”

Jodi stumbled away from her. She grabbed her bag and left through the door. Her heart hammered as she flew down the stairs. *Not you.*

Them? Emily *did* want to kill *them*?

She stepped out onto the sidewalk and found Paige on the phone, her hand over her mouth and tears pouring down her face. Bette was rubbing her back.

Paige looked up at Jodi, her eyes wide in terror and pain.

The absence of feeling in Jodi’s fingertips spread up her elbow, to her shoulder, and into her chest as Paige whispered, “Julian got hurt during water polo. He’s not breathing.”

Case No. 4512420

Excerpt from the journal of Emily Mills

Entered into evidence 6.08.2024 by Det. Chelsea Harding

**MAR. 5, 2024**

**JULIAN HOLLISTER DOESN'T LIKE ME. NO MATTER WHAT I DO, IT SEEMS.**

**LAST WEEK IT WAS GOING TO THE MOVIES, THIS WEEK IT'S THE FOOTBALL GAME. HE CAME BACK FROM THE TICKET BOOTH WITH FIVE AND WHEN PAIGE REMINDED HIM IT'S SIX OF US, HE GLANCED AT ME AND SAID, "I ONLY SEE FIVE PEOPLE HERE."**

**THE ONLY GOOD THING ABOUT THAT WAS THAT ZACK WENT WITH ME BACK TO THE TICKET BOOTH AND PAID FOR ME, LIKE A DATE.**

**BUT I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO ABOUT JULIAN. I ASKED ZACK WHY THEY'RE FRIENDS, AND HE SHRUGGED. LIKE HE DIDN'T ANSWER. I WISH ZACK KNEW HOW GREAT HE IS. HE DOESN'T NEED PEOPLE LIKE JULIAN HOLLISTER TAINING HIM. HE'S PERFECT ALREADY. SOMETIMES I WISH IT WAS JUST ZACK, ME, AND JODI. I'D LOVE THAT.**

**I ASKED JULIAN AFTER THE GAME WHY HE DIDN'T LIKE ME. BOLD, RIGHT? I'M TRYING TO BE BETTER. I THOUGHT HE WOULDN'T ANSWER, BUT THEN HE GRINNED AT ME LIKE A SHARK AND SAID, "THE FACT THAT YOU FEEL COMFORTABLE ENOUGH TO SPEAK TO ME. THAT'S WHY I DON'T LIKE YOU."**

**HE'S SO MEAN TO JODI, TOO. I CAN SEE IT. IT'S LIKE, ME AND JODI ARE ON ONE SIDE OF A LINE, AND JULIAN, PAIGE, AND LUCY ARE ON ANOTHER. AND ZACK IS IN THE MIDDLE. I WANT HIM TO CHOOSE US. I CAN'T LET JULIAN WIN.**

**I KNOW GOD WON'T FORGIVE ME FOR THIS, BUT—I'VE NEVER WANTED A PERSON TO DISAPPEAR LIKE I WANT JULIAN**

***HOLLISTER TO. I WANT HIM GONE.***

## Chapter Seventeen

Jodi sat in the back seat of Bette's car as it sped toward the hospital. She felt like she had whiplash. Everything happened so quickly.

Paige was praying under her breath, eyes squeezed shut in the passenger seat. Bette had turned the music off and just let the car be quiet.

Zack and Lucy suspected Julian had gotten a concussion early in the game. At one point in the fourth quarter, he didn't come up for air. The coach dragged him from the pool and performed CPR until the paramedics arrived, but the ambulance took him without a pulse.

Paige snapped her head to Bette after five minutes of fervent silence and said, "When she said there was a new presence—a *male* presence—did she ... Was that Julian?"

Bette shook her head, but her lips opened and closed like a bass fish.

"Was that why she couldn't talk to us?" Tears flowed freely down her face. "Because he was dead and we didn't know yet?"

Jodi blinked at the back of Paige's headrest, hearing words but not understanding them.

*Emily is very pleased about something.*

Paige didn't wait for the car to come to a full stop before jumping out in front of the emergency room. Bette went to park, and Jodi and Paige ran inside. Paige screamed for information from the front desk, while Jodi stood next to her in a fog. She barely registered a hand on her arm. A hug around her shoulders.

Zack and Lucy were at their sides.

"He started breathing in the ambulance—"

Zack's hand was between her shoulder blades.

"They have a pulse, but that's all they'll say right now," Lucy said.

Jodi looked down. Lucy's brown fingers were interlaced with her own. Jodi's left hand hung limply in her grasp.

"It's okay," Paige said, and she reached up and brushed Jodi's cheeks. Jodi thought it was odd before she felt thumbs smearing wetness across her face. Was she crying?

"Ray and Nina were at the match," Zack explained, though no one asked. "They're already here in the family waiting area."

They led Jodi and Paige to chairs in the corner of the front lobby. Lucy had a pack of Red Vines from the vending machine, and Jodi took one when offered, running her fingers over the spiral sides. They sat in silence, listening to the television in the corner. When Lucy asked how their appointment went, Paige's eyes shot up to Jodi.

"Really good," Paige jumped in. "I feel a lot better now."

"Were you ... able to talk to her or whatever?" Zack asked.

Smiling without her eyes, Paige said, "She let us know she's happy, and that we have nothing to worry about."

Jodi looked at her shoes. Her chest felt tight and her head was fuzzy. Paige wasn't any safer than she'd been this morning, but how could she explain that? How could she tell Paige what Nan had said at the end?

"But she did say something weird about the rose garden in McKinley Park," Paige continued. "I only remember going there with her once. But maybe we need to go there. Maybe ... maybe we could all get some closure if the five of us went."

Jodi stood, the phrase *the five of us* jarring hideously when they could possibly be a *four* after today. She shook out her numb hand and said, "I'm going to call my dad."

Lucy slowly came to her feet. Her gaze was on Jodi, searching her with interest. "Do you want company?"

She tore her eyes away, hoping Lucy couldn't read her every thought. "No, I'm good. Be right back."

Jodi tucked herself into the smoker's alcove outside, stepping over cigarette butts and pigeon crap. She pulled out Nan's card and called. She picked up on the first ring.

"Hello?"

“It’s Jodi. Dillon. We just left.”

“Is he alive?”

The adrenaline that had been keeping Jodi running for the last half hour was abruptly sucked from her body as Nan confirmed a few things with just those three words. Jodi had to place a hand on a nearby pillar covered with stucco and take a deep breath. “You tell me.”

Nan sighed. “His presence disappeared soon after you left. Not like normal, like when the relative or friend leaves my office and they follow. But erased.”

“You—” Jodi’s throat caught—“You wouldn’t be able to tell if he was in a coma or anything, right?”

“No. Only if he’s passed on. Which he hasn’t.”

“Right. Was that what Emily was pleased about?”

Nan paused. “She indicated that you were safe. Which made her happy. Like I said, her primary focus was you and your well-being.”

Jodi shook her head and squeezed her eyes closed. “That doesn’t make sense. She was in love with Zack. Obsessed with him.”

“Well, Zack wasn’t visiting me. Maybe she focused on you because you were there, but you might have been more special to her than you know.” Nan’s voice was soft, as if she were giving comfort.

“But she thought I was safe with Julian dead,” Jodi pushed.

“That’s not something I can tell you for sure.”

Jodi stared at an ambulance turning into the medical bay. “Thank you, Nan. For everything. I may try to come again if I can get the money, but—”

“Don’t worry about the money. Just call me. And if you can figure out who ‘H’ is, I think they’d be interested in talking to you.”

Jodi swallowed and said goodbye. When she entered the automatic sliding doors, she saw her three friends staring at the television mounted in the corner of the room. A reporter was standing outside their high school, and flashing across the screen was A “*THRASHER*” *HOSPITALIZED*.

Rolling her eyes, Jodi moved toward the waiting room, stopping only when she heard her own name coming through the speakers.

“Only one of the so-called ‘Thrashers,’ Jodi Dillon, was not charged. The DA’s office wouldn’t confirm if Dillon had offered information in exchange for clearing her name, but did confirm that Dillon had been

subpoenaed to testify against her group of friends. We'll have more on the Emily Mills case later tonight..."

Jodi stood frozen on the edge of the carpet as three heads turned to her in slow motion. Zack's mouth was open, and when his gaze landed on her, he closed it. She watched his jaw work. Lucy narrowed her eyes briefly before looking away. Paige looked back and forth between Jodi and the screen, the first to speak.

"Babe. Did you already know your charges were dropped?"

Jodi nodded. "They actually never sent paperwork. But, I—I just learned about the subpoena. I didn't want to make anyone mad, so I—"

"Oh, we can't be mad," Paige said, smiling weakly at her. "It's a subpoena. It's not your choice." But Lucy was staring out the window.

"Are you going to testify against us?" Zack's voice was tight, confused.

"I don't—I don't *want* to, but they've summoned me. So I'll have to."

"What would you even say? What do they think you'll know?"

"I have no idea," Jodi said, dropping down to sit two chairs away from Lucy. "I don't know anything, you're right."

"Yeah, it's probably just routine or something," Paige added brightly.

Zack took a deep breath and nodded, turning his attention back to the screen. Lucy didn't say a word, her chin rested in her hand and her fingers over her lips.



A few hours later, after Aunt Bette, Julian's water polo coach, and half his teammates had come and gone, the four of them were the only ones left in the lobby.

Mrs. Hollister broke their tense silence when she came out to tell them that Julian was awake but couldn't have visitors. When they left the hospital piled in Lucy's car, Jodi felt like there had been a fault line drawn. Maybe if she told them about the journal in the wall? Or the page she'd stolen from the guidance counselor's notes. Maybe she could prove to them that she was still on their side. That she was *trying*.

Lucy turned toward Jodi's house, and she realized she was getting dropped off first. Even though Paige was closest. She'd assumed they were

going to one of their houses to hang out. But Lucy wouldn't even meet her eyes in the rearview as she pulled up in front of her house.

Jodi waved her goodbyes, feeling like there was something she needed to say, or even *hear* from them. But all she got was a "see you at school."

When she turned to go inside, she found Oliver Burns sitting on his front porch, smoking a joint and watching her.

"Is he alive?" he said.

She nodded.

"Pity."

Sending him a quick glare, she walked over to him and gestured to his joint. "Care to share?"

He lifted a brow in surprise and offered it to her. She plopped down next to him on his patio sofa and brought the joint to her lips. She imagined the smoke traveling down into her lungs, spreading to her head, and clearing her troubles away.

"I'm shocked you even inhaled," Oliver said, taking it back.

"I'm the only one not facing criminal charges."

She stared at the small garden Oliver's mom used to keep beautiful.

"That makes sense," he said.

Turning to him, she narrowed her eyes. "It does?"

"Emily loved you. Her parents know it." He sucked on the joint one last time before putting it out. "*And* there's no evidence against you, I'm sure."

"Do you think there's evidence against the rest of them then?"

Oliver took a deep breath and said glibly, "Without a doubt."

"How would I *not* know about it?"

He stared at the cuticles on his right hand and said, "I'm positive there's tons of stuff you don't know about, Jodi. Conversations you're not a part of. Things you aren't invited to."

Jodi's stomach dropped. "What do you mean?"

He cracked his knuckles and said, "It's probably best you don't know, yeah? For your testimony?"

Shock battled with confusion and jealousy inside her. "You already saw the news?"

"Please," he scoffed. "I've gotten fifteen messages about it already. The whole school knows by now."

Pressing her eyes closed and leaning her elbows on her knees, Jodi tried to take deep breaths, wishing she hadn't had a hit.

"It's not like I ... like I got a *deal* or something—"

"I know. But it's you versus them now." He stretched his legs out and smiled, winking at her. "It's going to be carnage."

## Chapter Eighteen

The next day after school, Paige drove Jodi back to the hospital to visit Julian. Lucy and Zack had gone that morning, apparently. Jodi felt stupid for thinking it had anything to do with them avoiding her, but she couldn't help it.

"I didn't go looking for a deal, like the news says," Jodi said to Paige on the way there.

"Of course! I didn't think you did." Paige smiled at her.

When they were allowed back to see Julian, he looked pale and exhausted. His dark-rimmed eyes flitted over the two of them as they entered. Paige hugged him, but Jodi hung back.

"Oh, my god. You were literally dead for, like, three minutes or something, right?" Paige asked.

He ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah, I guess." His eyes found Jodi again. She awkwardly took a seat in the chair next to the bed. "They're discharging me tomorrow though."

"So, I don't know if you, like, remember or anything," Paige started, "but when we were at the medium yesterday trying to talk to Emily, I think she sensed your presence." Paige's eyes were glittering. "Isn't that weird?"

There was a pause. Julian stared at Paige, and then his lips quirked. "Weird."

"She had to stop and everything. Like she wasn't allowed to tell us you were dead. I just think it's so creepy..."

Jodi let Paige's voice wash over her as she watched Julian. His gaze drifted from Paige, slowly dragging over to Jodi. His hazel eyes were on her

for barely a second before they flitted over her shoulder and stayed there.

Paige continued, “You didn’t, like, feel anything, right? You don’t remember seeing us through the medium?”

There was an infinitesimal pause before Julian shook his head. “Nope.”

As Paige and Jodi got ready to leave, Jodi couldn’t help but feel like there was something she should say. She’d let Paige talk the whole time, and Julian had barely looked at her.

Jodi decided to just give him a friendly wave goodbye and follow Paige out the door.

“Dillon.”

She turned back. Julian’s gaze was on her finally. She waited in the doorway, watching his open mouth fail to form words.

“Yeah?”

He ran a hand through his hair and pressed his eyes closed, like a migraine was coming on. “Can I have your notes? From class?”

Jodi blinked at him. “Oh, sure. Yeah, I’ll ... yeah.”

He nodded, and it seemed he was back to not looking at her. Jodi swallowed.

“Glad you’re not dead,” she said quickly and spun on her heel, hurrying out the door and shaking her head in panic. “Glad you’re not dead,” she whispered to herself. “Great job, Jodi.”

She scurried to catch up with Paige.



The school play was in two weeks, and the theater classroom was a minefield of stressed actresses, costume fittings, and Mrs. Calloway’s short fuse.

For Jodi and Oliver, this was the final week to finish the backdrop and set building. Oliver had used a beautiful wood stain on the planks of a porch that matched Jodi’s paint perfectly. By that Saturday, when they loaded the set pieces into the theater, Jodi got to watch as Doug laced the backdrop to a pole and raised it up, revealing the clouds, then treetops, then shingle roofs. Jodi saw flaws and things she wished she could redo, but Mrs. Calloway cried when she walked into the theater on Sunday morning.

Jodi spent the next week learning the show, preparing to be Nikita's "wardrobe assistant" to help with her costume changes. Oliver got to be in charge of opening and closing the curtain, putting a smug expression on his face, and Jodi thought she'd ask for that position next time—before she even realized she was planning for a next time.

Opening night went off with only a few hitches. The lead boy forgot half his lines for a scene and ended up skipping three pages of dialogue when he got them back on track, but all in all, it was exhilarating to hear three hundred people behind the theater wall, listening and chuckling and sniffling. Jodi waited for Oliver to finish mopping the stage, standing near the backstage door as Nikita and the rest of the cast came out to greet their family and friends.

Jodi had left tickets for her friends at the box office. She hadn't really expected any of them to come, but now, standing alone while everyone else had someone to support them, looking at them with admiration, she thought she should have told Zack how proud she was of her backdrop. After news about her subpoena came out, it would have felt good to have Paige or Lucy here, to show they still cared about her.

"So she just dies? That's the moral of the story?"

Jodi spun at the familiar voice. Julian looked like a fish out of water as he stood in a sea of stage makeup and rowdy drama kids.

"I guess..." Jodi tilted her head, trying to come up with an explanation for his presence. She followed his gaze down to what he was reading in his hands. A program for *Our Town*. She blinked. "Did you—You sat through the whole thing?"

"Yeah. You could have mentioned it was three hours, Dillon." He leaned back on the wall next to them. "That's a serious time commitment to see some trees and rooftops you painted."

Jodi's brows drew together. She looked past him, searching for Zack, or Lucy, or Paige.

"They were nice though," he added, flipping the page in the program. "The trees. And it was cool how the houses in your painting matched the house that was onstage. Did they send you up on a ladder to paint the top?"

"I ... No, I painted it on the ground, and then it was hung."

"Right. That makes more sense." He stared down at the program like it had brand-new information for him. She watched pinpricks of color bloom

on his cheekbones.

Someone called her name down the hall, and she looked up to see Oliver nodding toward the parking lot.

“I have to go. They go to a diner after every show. Apparently it’s the worst food in existence, but the staff doesn’t kick them out unless they start food fights...”

She was rambling. Julian nodded and stood from the wall.

“Do you think you wanna do this?” he said.

“What?”

“Do artwork for theater. Like can you make a career in it?”

She looked back and forth between his eyes, searching for sarcasm, derision, condescension. She found none.

“I think you can. I’m not sure it’s what I want to *do*, but I may take theater again next semester.”

“Cool. Yeah, you’re good at it. Anyway. See you Monday.”

Before she could blink, he was slipping away through the stream of the crowd. If she’d ever seen Julian Hollister in a socially awkward moment, she would have said this was one of them. It wasn’t until she was chowing down on mozzarella sticks and sharing a strawberry milkshake with Nikita that she realized she hadn’t thanked him for coming.

★ ★ ★

*Our Town* played its final performance the following Saturday evening. It was apparently a tradition that the cast and crew break down the set together on the Sunday morning—completely hungover from the night before. Oliver drove her over to one of the actor’s houses.

“I make *bank* at these cast parties,” he said as they parked in front of the house. He stopped by his trunk and grabbed his backpack, patting the filled pockets lovingly. “Do you wanna make a quick hundred tonight?”

She tore her eyes from his backpack. “Make...?”

“I’ll let you keep twenty-five percent if you wanna push. Just go up to people, start talking about Zack Thrasher, and then ask if they wanna smoke a joint with you.”

Jodi felt her neck flush. “No, I don’t—I don’t feel comfortable with that.”

Oliver shrugged. “That’s fine. If you change your mind, let me know. You’d be surprised how many people would want to talk about the investigation while Jodi Dillon smoked weed with them.”

He started up the pathway through the lawn, heading toward the side door of the house. Jodi stared after him, feeling like she’d just failed some kind of test. Or maybe aced it.

Nikita stumbled over to her, ranting about the local theater awards and the judge that had been at the performance that evening. Jodi’s eyes caught on a girl with dark brown skin on the patio, assessing her. Jodi looked away. She’d been stared at plenty of times, especially now that the news was covering the Thrashers weekly. When she glanced at the patio again, the girl was talking to Oliver, her dark eyes darting to Jodi.

She tried to focus on what Nikita was saying, but her gaze stuck on someone else on the patio.

“What is Reagan Matthews doing here?” Jodi said.

Nikita turned to look. “Her brother is in the cast. He played the mailman.”

Jodi narrowed her eyes. Reagan looked so out of place with her beach waves and perfect skin next to all the techie kids with acne and graphic tees.

Later, when Jodi was exiting the bathroom, she found Reagan leaning against the wall staring down at her phone. Reagan looked up, swooping hair out of her eyes, and a slow smirk spread across her face.

“Jodi,” she greeted. “Did you finally get thrown out with the trash?”

Jodi glared back. “What?”

“I haven’t seen you with the Thrashers at all.” Reagan pushed past her into the bathroom, then turned. “It was smart of you to give them up and take a deal.”

“That’s not what happened—”

“*Please*, Jodi. Your friends are going to juvie, and you weren’t even charged.”

“Believe what you want. I didn’t sell them out.” Jodi crossed her arms. “And *nobody’s* going to juvie.”

Reagan’s eyes glittered. “That’s cute. That they’re still keeping things from you.”

The door started to close. Jodi felt her skin pulled taut. Her arm shot out. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Reagan looked her up and down. “Ask Lucy who the eyewitness is in her assault charges.” She lifted a perfectly defined brow and shut the door.

Jodi felt like there was water in her ears. She stared at the closed door.

Lucy hadn’t told her there was an eyewitness. Lucy hadn’t told her much about anything lately. Jodi still didn’t know what the assault even *was*, but Reagan was claiming to have seen it?

Jodi felt her heart thundering as she headed out back, needing some air. Oliver tried to pass her a joint on the patio, and she declined. She needed to think, not forget.

Sitting on a bench at the side of the house, Jodi had barely gotten ten minutes to herself before footsteps came toward her, crunching in the unraked leaves. She looked up, and the girl who had been talking to Oliver appeared in front of her.

“Are you Jodi Dillon?” she asked. Jodi nodded. “I’m Vanessa. I go to Sac High.”

“Hi.” Jodi waited for her to explain herself.

Vanessa took a deep breath and pushed her long braids over her shoulder. “I knew Emily from freshman year.”

Jodi blinked at her. “Oh.” Her throat tightened, and she couldn’t think of anything else to say. Did Vanessa think Jodi “bullied her to death” like so many others did? Jodi braced herself for an argument, glancing at the people in the yard and realizing she and Vanessa were secluded in this corner.

Vanessa stared at her. “Emily never told you about me?”

“Sorry, no...” Jodi stood. “What would she have told me?”

“Look, I know you probably can’t talk about any of this because of your friends’ charges, but I just needed to make sure someone knew...”

“Knew what?” Jodi felt her arms tingling.

“Why she left Sac High,” Vanessa said. “Someone’s lawyer should do some digging. That’s all.”

Jodi’s pulse slowed as she realized Vanessa didn’t want to yell at her, but before she could ask her what she meant, Vanessa turned back for the party. Jodi called after her, but Vanessa made her way back inside, almost running. She pushed through the crowd and was gone.



The cast and crew of *Our Town* took the set apart on Sunday. Jodi took pictures of the backdrop to include in college applications. She was still thinking about what Julian said about “making a career in it.”

But Sunday night, Jodi sat in her bedroom with a Sac High '22/'23 yearbook she'd gotten from one of the actors who had a sister there. She found Emily in the freshman *Ms*, and after ten minutes of searching, she found Vanessa Jones—also a freshman. She wasn't sure what else she could get from this yearbook, but she flipped through every page anyway.

She turned to page twenty-three, the Sac High Homecoming Rally of 2022. There, in purple and white face paint, Emily and Vanessa smiled at the camera, their cheeks pressed together as they hugged each other close.

Jodi stared down at the picture. They looked happy. She found three other pictures of Emily and Vanessa throughout the yearbook—sometimes just the two of them, sometimes in a group. Finally, a picture taken around May of that year showed Emily leaning her head on Vanessa's shoulder in PE class. Vanessa was leaned away from her, a distant look on her face.

# Chapter Nineteen

DECEMBER

*Jodi was sitting on a window ledge, reaching out for a tree branch.*

*“I’ve got you,” a voice said to her right.*

*Zack sat in the tree, arms extended to her. She smiled at him and stretched her leg out, letting him pull her out of her second-story window.*

*“See? That wasn’t too bad,” he whispered excitedly.*

*It was dark on the street except for the lamps that would always wink at her. She let Zack help her down the branches, like she was following him off to Neverland.*

*A black Mustang idled on the street with its lights off. Zack’s friends waited inside, and although Jodi could tell they looked bored and even cranky, she didn’t care. Zack had asked her to hang out. Zack wanted her there.*

*They drove to the rose garden, and Zack and Julian Hollister lit joints while Paige Montgomery and Lucy Reed drank hard ciders. The guys dared the girls to streak, and Jodi laughed as Paige and Lucy ran in their underwear around the abandoned playground. Zack and Julian took off after them, and Paige screamed when Julian caught up with her and tackled her to the ground.*

*Jodi turned her face up to the stars and thanked Jesus for this night. For this boy. For this life.*

★ ★ ★

Jodi woke with a start. Her left arm was completely numb, and as she shook life into it, she couldn't help but remember the dream.

The dream that didn't feel like it was hers.

Jodi had been there that night. She remembered Paige and Lucy streaking, and her and Emily declining. She remembered sitting with Emily in the rose garden, waiting in silence for her friends to return so she wasn't alone with the strange girl.

But that wasn't her second-story window. That wasn't her tree. It was Emily's.

Jodi wondered if Emily had even noticed she was there that night.

★ ★ ★

"I think we should go to the rose garden." Paige popped a fry into her mouth and slid her eyes over to Jodi.

It was the first day of winter break, and it had been Lucy's idea to celebrate at Burr's for lunch. Zack had passed chemistry with a C plus, Lucy had been offered a volleyball scholarship to Denver (her third choice), and Jodi had gotten her CalArts application in with a recommendation from Mrs. Calloway—practically blackmail for agreeing to take drama again in the spring.

This was the first day in three weeks that the five of them had gotten together. Jodi tried not to take it personally, but Lucy flat-out asked her last week if she had any idea what they expected her to say on the witness stand against them. Jodi didn't know. They hadn't even scheduled a deposition.

Jodi had ridden her bike to the Thrashers' two weeks ago to tell Greg about Vanessa Jones. He said he'd look into it, but not to get her hopes up—everything could be circumstantial. She left without even seeing Zack; Greg had been watching him like a hawk in the lead-up to his chemistry final. But Jodi couldn't help but notice that Kiera was also taking chemistry, and Kiera was allowed to join Zack after school before his tutor arrived so they could attempt the homework together.

Julian had his first meeting with the judge during finals week, scheduled purposefully to sabotage him, they guessed. She didn't know if he'd started to struggle in anatomy class toward the end, or if he was checking up on

her, but he started asking her for her notes after class, walking back to her locker with her. Then he would ask about the drawings in her locker or stay and poke fun at her clothes, but it was lighter—less cutting. In retaliation, she'd started drawing pictures of him being torn apart by wolves in the margins of her notes.

Paige had given up on her obsession with Emily and the supernatural since visiting Nan's salon. Or so Jodi had thought.

"Why now?"

Zack looked up from his phone, and Julian met Jodi's eyes before looking away.

"It just feels like unfinished business." Paige tossed her hair over her shoulder and wiped her fingers on her napkin. "Emily wanted us to go there." Her eyes flicked to Lucy.

"There hasn't been anything weird happening though. Has there?" Jodi asked.

The group was quiet as Lucy and Paige seemed to have a silent conversation across the table. Then Paige blurted, "Lucy is having visions."

"They're not *visions*," Lucy retorted quickly. She sighed and addressed the table. "It's called sleep paralysis. I've been having trouble breathing in the mornings. It's like an out-of-body experience. It's not a nightmare. I know I'm awake, but I can't catch my breath, and ... it feels like someone is watching me."

Paige turned and stared intently at Jodi, as if to say, *just like me*.

"And you think it's Emily?" Zack said.

"No ... I don't truly *believe* it's her. I'm just scared and unable to move, and there's a lot of stress around these trials."

The table was quiet, waiting for more. Jodi remembered the dreams she'd been having, waking up without feeling in her arm. Just the night before, she'd had one where she *was* Emily.

"I've had dreams, too," Zack said. The table turned to him. "She, like, *Inceptions* her way into past memories. Things she wasn't there for. I don't have the sleep paralysis thing though..."

Lucy nodded. Jodi looked around. So Paige, Zack, her, and now Lucy were all being haunted in a way.

Paige turned to them and said, "So ... rose garden."

Jodi thought about the text she'd received last week from an unknown number: **Good luck on your finals.** She'd called it immediately, but it didn't go through. Neither the text or Lucy's breathing issues pointed toward Emily specifically.

"What is it you want to do there?" Jodi asked Paige.

She shrugged. "Honestly, I have no idea. She said go to the rose garden, so I wanna go. I think it would be really good for all five of us to go together. Tonight."

"Tonight? Why the hurry?" Julian crossed his arms.

"It's just ... I'd like to do it before Christmas."

"Again, why?"

"Because! Because tonight is the winter solstice, and I think it would be more appropriate to try to talk to a dead girl on a witchy day."

"Paige."

"No, listen! It's not like I'm going to try a spell or anything! All I'm saying," Paige continued, despite the disbelieving expressions, "is that if we were to visit the rose garden one evening, we would have the best luck with a solstice."

"Best luck with what?" Zack's voice was soft.

"With letting Emily guide us."

"Not convinced. Sorry, Paige," said Jodi. "Besides, I'll be at my aunt's house tonight, and there is *no way* to sneak out of that house."

"Why are you at your aunt's?"

Jodi snapped her eyes to Julian, surprised by his interest.

"I ... My dad took holiday hours. So I'm spending the week of Christmas with my mom's family."

He watched her, searching for more. She tore her eyes away. If he stared too long, maybe he'd see the yelling match she and her dad had had last week. Or the lamp he'd knocked off the living room table in a drunken stumble. She was happy to be at her aunt's and happy her dad could get more money from the holidays. Simple.

"I'm out, too," said Lucy. "We're going to Tahoe tomorrow and leaving early. So I really don't want to be running around town all night."

Pouting, Paige leaned back, accepting defeat.

"Hey, there's always the spring equinox," Julian said drily, knocking her shoulder.

Jodi felt bad for Paige, but she was far more relieved that they were not going to sit in a park at midnight, calling upon a dead girl to speak to them.

When Mr. Burr came over to ask if Paige needed more fries, Jodi saw Zack staring out the window, thinking hard on something.

★ ★ ★

Jodi had resigned herself to spending New Year's with her aunt and grandma, doing jigsaw puzzles and burning tamales. Lucy was still in Tahoe through New Year's, and Paige had a meeting with her legal team scheduled for the first week of the year, so she said she was lying low in town for the thirty-first. Julian invited Zack to Napa with the Hollisters.

On the thirty-first at ten in the morning, Oliver texted her.

**nobody home?**

She replied, **nope. dad on a drive and im at my grandmas**

He sent back an Apple Music link to the Postmodern Jukebox cover of "What Are You Doing New Year's Eve?"

"Can I meet up with a friend tonight?" she asked Rosa.

"Which friend?" Rosa lifted her threaded brow.

"An old friend. Do you remember the Burnses next door? I used to watch cartoons with their son."

Thank god Rosa hadn't seen Oliver recently. The septum ring and the hair would have set off alarm bells. But the version of Oliver Burns that Rosa remembered was gap-toothed and had talked with her about the new Selena Gomez makeup line.

At ten that night, she got in Oliver's car, and they drove out to South Sacramento to some junior's house. Inside, a large television hosted a video game tournament between four dudes, and there was alcohol, pipes, and joints for all.

Oliver knew everybody, and she noticed he brought in his backpack. Nikita was holding court in the kitchen, and she grabbed Jodi's elbow when she saw her, drawing her into the conversation. Jodi felt eyes trailing over her, greedy gazes from people who realized that Zack Thrasher's best friend was here.

It was climbing toward midnight, and the video game paused in favor of Ryan Seacrest. Jodi was out on the patio, near the aboveground pool with a few girls she knew from stage crew, consoling one of them about their cheating boyfriend. Her eyes wandered to the screen door, and she nearly choked.

Emily Mills was standing in the doorway, eyes pale blue and looking out over the backyard, as if searching for someone.

Jodi drew a sharp breath, letting the hazy scene clear and reform in her mind.

Hannah. Hannah Mills, in her sister's orange shoes, with her sister's hair and eyes, was floating over to a table with empty Cheetos bowls and greasy pizza boxes. Before Jodi could get her breathing to even out, she watched Hannah accept a pipe from some dude, artfully tilt the lighter, and inhale. Jodi stared in shock as Hannah blended right into the crowd.

Oliver's drunken cackle from next to the barbeque pulled her attention, and Jodi made a beeline for him. She tugged on his sleeve, and he stepped aside with her.

"Hannah Mills is here. She's *fourteen!*"

His lips twitched. "Don't pretend you don't know how long your bestie Zack has been smoking pot. Or how old Lucy Reed was the first time she had her stomach pumped."

"But ... they're different."

"Jodi. Hannah Mills has been buying from me for six months."

Jodi reeled back. "Oliver, she's really vulnerable. That doesn't seem right."

He scoffed, stealing the joint back from her. "You really want to argue with me about how to treat vulnerable people?" He brought the joint to his lips and muttered, "Your *friends* did far worse things to a Mills girl, you know."

Jodi frowned. There was something specific here. He stared down at the cement patio and pressed his lips together, like he wished he could swallow something back.

"What did you mean before, when you said there were things I didn't know?"

He leveled guilty eyes at her. Extending the joint back to her, he said, "Hit this. So I can pretend you won't remember this in the morning."

Jodi blinked. She brought it to her lips and inhaled, waiting for him.

Oliver stared out over the party. The two of them were tucked into a corner near the fence. No one else could overhear.

"I was finishing the set for *The Miracle Worker* last spring, and I was the last one in the theater lab. When I left, it was like seven or eight. There were only a couple of cars left in the lot, but one was driving slowly around. I only remember because that was weird." He met her eyes. "Then it sped up. And I heard screaming. That's when I saw Emily Mills on the hood."

Jodi's heartbeat leapt as she realized what he was saying.

"I'd seen you guys play the game before, so I knew what was happening." He sniffed, and readjusted his septum ring. "The car took a sharp turn, and I heard her tell them to stop. She was screaming, 'Stop! Stop!' She was begging, Jodi."

"There's ... there's a safe word. You have to say *ride or die*."

He shrugged. "Whatever. I'm just saying, she wanted it to stop." He stubbed out the joint and blew out a deep breath. "She slid off the car. I watched her tumble down and roll. When everyone got out of the car to check on her, she started laughing, but I don't know if that was just what she thought they wanted."

Jodi croaked, "Who's 'they'?"

He locked eyes with her and said, "Lucy Reed. Paige Montgomery. Julian Hollister. And Zack Thrasher."

It felt like a cold hand had reached inside of her chest and grabbed hold of her heart. She nodded, looking down at their shoes. "And you've told the cops this."

Oliver said nothing. "When I got home, I saw you carrying in groceries. I told the cops that, too."

She realized then that this was a key piece to the case and a key reason why she was never formally charged.

"Who was driving?" she asked softly.

"I don't know, actually. I was watching Emily to see if she was even moving after falling off the hood. I didn't see who got out of the driver's seat." He turned to her completely and put his hands on her shoulders. "Listen. When they question you, you know nothing, okay? There's no reason for you to know about it. It's okay if you lie. But I thought it was

important for you to know that your friends didn't care about Emily Mills at all. You were the only one that did."

Jodi remembered the night she'd taken Emily to the movie instead of letting her play Ride or Die—because she had known in her heart that it would end like that.

Jodi felt like screaming. There was some part of her that was white-hot at the idea that she wasn't invited somewhere and Emily Mills was, and they never told her. They never spoke about it again. Was it on purpose? Was there a conversation about not inviting Jodi, not telling Jodi later? How often did something like that happen?

She was suddenly unsure if Lucy was really in Tahoe. If Paige was really staying in tonight. Were they in Napa with Julian and Zack without her?

She shook herself. "When was this? March?"

"April."

Something slithered against her spine. She saw it clearly in her head. Emily started laughing because she was supposed to laugh when she got thrown from the hood. Emily went home and realized she could have died. Emily realized no one would have stopped until she died. Emily tried to kill herself that night.

Jodi breathed deeply. "Do you have more weed? I need something else."

Oliver draped his arm over her shoulder. "Come on."

He steered her inside. Nikita was sitting on the couch, giggling and passing a bong back and forth. Jodi started to head her way, but Oliver led her toward the kitchen.

Hannah Mills reached for the bong from Nikita. Jodi forced her shoulders to relax. Emily had been dependent on other people's opinion of her, but that was not Hannah. Maybe she should be more like Hannah.

Oliver was pouring shots with a few guys—some she knew, some she didn't. A shot glass with a deep amber liquid appeared in her hand, but she handed it back to the guy next to her.

"I don't drink."

"Yeah, she's the Thrashers' DD," one of them said.

Blinking to clear her eyes, she opened her mouth to respond, but it was full of cotton.

Oliver laughed, clinked glasses, and poured his down his throat. The temperature of the kitchen rose.

“Zack Thrasher’s not here, sweetheart,” the other guy said. “I’ll drive you home.”

They laughed. Oliver smiled and poured another round.

Jodi felt tired and full of air. Like she could float away at a moment’s notice. Zack Thrasher wasn’t here. He’d left her alone on New Year’s with Emily Mills’s ghost. None of them were here. None of them *had* been here in a long while. Maybe they didn’t want to be.

Oliver was the one to hand her the shot. And he knew about her dad. So if Oliver said it was okay—it was safe for Hank Dillon’s daughter to start drinking—then maybe it was.

It tasted just like she’d thought it would. Like something from the chemistry lab. Like poison. But the guys cheered her and gave her another, so she drank that, too, coughing.

She didn’t know what was the weed and what was the rum, but very quickly the world got fuzzy. She needed to lean on the counter and count the tiles on the kitchen floor.

Someone handed her another shot, and she said to no one, “My dad drinks Corona.”

“You’re gonna want to stick to rum, babe.”

Sometime later, on the couches with Nikita, she wondered if she liked it. She wondered if it was something that brought her any relief.

“Why do you think people drink?” she muttered to Nikita, but a redhead was sitting in her place. Jodi didn’t know when Nikita had left her.

The redhead had smoke coming out of her nostrils, like a dragon. “I think ... because we’re not supposed to.”

Jodi blinked at her. No, that wasn’t it.

A flash of blond hair caught her eye, but disappeared before Jodi could turn her head fast enough. Her skull felt like a fishbowl, the top open and sloshing.

When it was time to throw up, Jodi found the upstairs bathroom empty. She tied her hair back and wet the hand towel with cold water. She had plenty of experience helping Paige and Lucy.

The splash in the toilet was loud against the quiet tiles. The violence in her throat pulled tears out of her eyes and snot out of her nose, and wasn’t it

nice that no one was here for this? Wasn't it nice that they would never know?

She'd gotten *Happy New Year!* texts in the group chat, but nothing else. Maybe that's the kind of friends they were now. Holidays and birthdays, but once they graduated in June, there wouldn't be anything but the reunions to bring them together.

She heaved again, spitting and dragging the washcloth over her face. She sat back on the furry gray carpet next to the shower, thinking of just climbing inside and going to sleep.

Maybe if she'd told Zack she was proud of her backdrop, he would have come to see *Our Town*. She liked painting things for a purpose. Not just a bowl of fruit on canvas to hang in someone's kitchen, but something that told a story.

She'd been to all of Lucy's track meets. She'd sat through a Model UN meet last year for Paige. She had pulled back both girls' hair and pressed a cold towel to their necks whenever Paige or Lucy drank too much. She'd driven Julian and Zack home without a license whenever they were too blitzed. And here she was sitting in a bathroom alone, not even sure if she'd locked the door, but too far away to crawl to it to check.

She stared down at their group chat. Julian had sent a selfie with his tongue out and Zack asleep on the deck of the Napa house in the background.

Julian had come to *Our Town* for some reason. He was the only person who had been showing up for a while. She hadn't thanked him. How was he supposed to know to come to the next one?

She flicked her screen to her contacts and listened to the ring until someone picked up. "Yo."

"Thank you for coming to the play." Her voice sounded hoarse and echo-y.

"The—the play? Yeah. I told you I liked your painting."

"It's called a backdrop. When it's for theater, it's called a backdrop." She pressed the washcloth to her forehead and tilted her head back.

Spinning, tilting—

Humming, she sat up again, pressing her eyes closed until the ground was beneath her again.

“Why are you calling me at two A.M., Dillon?” There was a smile in his voice, and she wondered what she’d said that was funny.

“I should have thanked you. Before. And I thought if you didn’t know that I apprep—appra—*appreciated* it, you wouldn’t come to the next one.”

“Yeah, I’ll be there.” She heard sheets rustling. “You tell me the time and place.”

“It’s in May, I think. I can look it up, hold on—”

“Later, Dillon.” He laughed. “So, did you and your aunt do anything fun?”

“I went to a party.”

“Oh, yeah? Whose party?”

“I don’t know them. Oliver Burns brought me.”

A pause. “Is that why you sound weird? You flying, Dillon?”

“Like a kite,” she sang. “But I’m also spinning like a ... something that spins. Hey, what do you keep in your flask?”

“Vodka. It’s my mom’s favorite.”

“Have you tried rum?”

“I—yes, I’ve tried rum,” he said, and she heard him chuckle. The sound was warm.

“It’s terrible. Is vodka better?”

The phone was quiet. After a handful of seconds, Jodi pulled away the screen to make sure her battery hadn’t died.

“Are you ... Did you drink?”

“A little bit. Maybe a lot. I don’t know what’s a lot.” She rubbed her face. “But I didn’t throw anything at anyone. Not that I thought I would, but ... it’s nice to know that I don’t hurt people when I’m drunk, like my dad. Or yours.”

“Where are you?” She heard the sheets moving again.

“In the bathroom.”

“Who’s with you?”

Jodi looked behind her into the bathtub to make sure. “Nobody. But Hannah Mills is downstairs somewhere. She’s a druggie. Isn’t that the stupidest thing you’ve ever heard?”

“Whose house is it?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t meet him. Or maybe I did.”

“Can you call an Uber? Can you go home right now?”

“An Uber at two A.M. on New Year’s Eve? What am I, a millionaire?” She snorted at herself.

“I’m gonna Venmo you a hundred dollars right now. Is your Uber app hooked up to Venmo?”

“I don’t...” She looked down at her screen. “It might be, but I’m at three percent.”

“Jodi, can you find a charger?”

“Jodi.” She hummed. “I didn’t know you knew my first name.”

“Okay, just ... drop me a pin to your location. Go outside and wait for a car.”

“Which car?”

“Dillon, focus! Just—”

She waited. “‘Just’ what?” Nothing.

She pulled her phone screen away. Dead.

Jodi blew out a breath and pulled herself up to her knees to go find a phone charger—

The room spun. She turned and vomited into the toilet as a knock came to the door. “Is Jodi Dillon in there?”

Coughing and wiping her mouth, she nodded. Then realized no one could see her. “Yes.”

“Jodi, you sick?” It was Nikita.

She moaned a response, and the door opened.

“Aw, poor little Thrasher.” Nikita chuckled and pulled Jodi’s hair back off her neck. “Let’s get you into bed.”

She tugged her off the floor and encouraged her to drink water from the faucet. After scrabbling through the drawers, she gave Jodi a tube of toothpaste to scrub her mouth with.

“My phone’s dead,” she said as Nikita led her down the hall.

“I’m sure we can find you a charger. I’ll look for one and bring you some water, too.”

“You’re really nice,” Jodi mumbled, falling onto a quilted bed.

“Don’t tell anyone. It would ruin my reputation.” Nikita winked at her and pushed Jodi’s hair away from her face.

Jodi was out before Nikita could close the door behind her.

Jodi opened her eyes to a dark room, unfamiliar and heavy. A bass beat pounded downstairs in time with her headache, rattling the second-story floorboards. The ceiling was spinning. She was going to be sick again. She swallowed back bile and turned on her side.

A halo of blond hair fanned over the pillow next to her. A pair of clear blue eyes watched her.

The bed felt unsteady, like a waterbed, but she focused on the girl staring back at her.

“Emily,” she croaked. “Emily, what are you doing here?”

She didn’t move, didn’t blink. Had she died? Again?

Then Emily lifted her hand and brushed Jodi’s sticky hair away from her forehead.

“I’m sorry,” Jodi said. “I’m sorry you’re dead.”

Emily’s eyes flickered back and forth between Jodi’s. “Do you miss her?” Emily whispered, voice nothing but air.

She felt her throat burn with acid, and her heartbeat in her temple.

“Sometimes.”

Emily brushed her fingertips over Jodi’s eyes, closing them.

★ ★ ★

The door banged open, and Jodi’s head split in two as the overhead light burst on. She slapped her hand over her eyes, feeling fingertips like butterfly kisses.

“She’s in here!”

Someone was leaning over her, speaking quietly to her, but she just needed to go back to sleep. It wouldn’t hurt like this if she just slept.

“Come on, Jo,” the voice said, deep and warm. He helped her turn on her side slowly as someone else came in the room. Jodi’s eyes were wet and blurry. Her stomach turned and she bolted upright, bracing herself on the nightstand and throwing up on the carpet.

The two people said nothing, but then the second one cracked open a water bottle. Then soft hands were on her chin, wiping at her mouth.

“It’s okay, baby girl.” Paige. She ran her fingers through the hair at Jodi’s neck. “Let’s drink some water, okay?”

Jodi blinked away the haze and took the bottle from her. Paige smiled, even as she crouched over Jodi’s sick.

“I’ll find a towel for the carpet, or…” Zack. Zack was here.

“Yeah, and get one for the car,” said Paige.

Jodi swallowed three sips of water, wondering if she was asleep. Paige grabbed her elbow and helped her stand.

“What about Emily?” Jodi said, turning over her shoulder to the bed.

Empty. She’d been alone.

“What?” Paige said, a panic in her voice.

Jodi shook her head, then abruptly stopped when it made things worse. “Nothing. I was ... I was dreaming.”

Zack met them at the door with a beach towel stolen from somewhere.

“Why aren’t you in Napa?” she asked him when he took her elbow from Paige. “How did you get here?” Just then, Julian appeared at the top of the stairs, having taken them two at a time.

He stopped when he saw her. She immediately wondered what she looked like.

“Do you have your phone?” Paige asked, closing the bedroom door behind them. Jodi nodded. “Okay, we’ll charge it in the car. Let’s go home.”

Eyes turned on them as they passed people smoking on the staircase, and it seemed like the entire living room was waiting for them to descend by the time they came into view.

“Hey. Everything okay?”

Jodi turned and saw Oliver putting out a cigarette, coming around from the side porch. He looked between Zack and the others.

“Yeah, I drank too much—”

A fist slammed into Oliver’s jaw, sending him tumbling sideways. Paige yelled and Jodi jumped.

Julian was on top of him in a flash, tugging him up by his shirt and punching him again.

“Julian!”

“You know,” he hissed. Oliver’s eye was split. His nose bleeding. “You *know* and you know she doesn’t drink—”

“She’s her own person, not your lapdog. She makes her own choices—”

Julian's fist reared back.

"Hit me again and I swear to *god*, I'll press charges." Oliver's eyes were bright, rage-filled.

The sharp crack of Julian's knuckles connecting with Oliver's face resonated again, and then he was standing, heading toward his truck and starting the engine.

Jodi stared down in horror at Oliver's bloody teeth and swollen eye. Zack leaned down to help him up, but he jerked away, snarling, "Get the fuck out of here."

She thought she should stay and make sure Oliver was okay, but Paige took Jodi to the left, where her car was parked in a neighbor's driveway. Tossing Zack the keys, Paige slipped into the back seat with Jodi. She spread the beach towel across the floor just in case Jodi needed to throw up again, and then let Jodi lay her head in her lap. Zack turned off the radio, backed out of the driveway, and followed the black truck out of South Sac. They didn't say anything until Jodi finally asked, "When did you get back from Napa?"

Zack cleared his throat. "We're not. Julian's parents are still up there. He and I drove back after you called him."

She remembered her suspicion. The idea that they were all there without her.

"Paige, were you there?"

"No, I was home, remember? I met them here once we figured out where you were."

Jodi watched hot tears spill down over Paige's knees as her hair was pulled away from her neck, patterns traced through her scalp like Jodi did for her.

She slept in one of the Thrashers' guest rooms. Two water bottles poured down her throat and a pair of aspirin later, and she was out, Paige's fingertips still braiding and unbraiding her hair.

When she woke up to sunlight breaking through the part in the curtains, Paige was asleep next to her, and Lucy was passed out in the armchair, curled into a ball with her phone still in her hand.

# Chapter Twenty

JANUARY

Jodi was properly mortified by the time she'd sobered up come daybreak. She also had to pee, but she didn't want to wake up Paige and Lucy yet.

But none of that mattered when the bedroom door opened with a quiet click, and Paige shot up in bed, wiping her drool and squinting at Zack in the doorway.

"Sorry, sorry."

Lucy shifted in the armchair, pulling a blanket up over her head until she disappeared. Paige reached for her phone, as if to press the snooze button. He crept over to Jodi and paused when he found her awake.

"Rosa can't reach you," he whispered.

"Fuck." Jodi hadn't responded to her yet, hoping she could pass it off as passing out and getting "Oliver" to drive her back in the morning. She opened her phone.

"I told her I was at the party, and you're at my house now."

She sat up and rubbed her thumbs under her eyes. Jodi was still reeling from the stupidity of the past six hours. Her cheeks flushed and tears pricked her eyes.

"Okay, thanks," she said, unable to meet his eyes. "Can I take a shower?"

"Yeah," Zack said and pointed to the attached bathroom. "Towels should be in there."

She slipped out of bed, feeling cotton-mouthed and groggy. Avoiding her reflection in the bathroom, she grabbed a *T*-monogrammed towel from the stack and started the water. Out the curtained window, she caught a view

of the backyard. Julian was already up, doing laps. She stared down at the pool, wishing she hadn't called him. She could have kept this to herself, woken up in a strange bedroom with a killer hangover, and gone home—her friends none the wiser. She tore her eyes away and got under the spray.

Only Lucy was in the bedroom when Jodi came out of the shower, flipping through her phone until the bathroom door cracked open.

"Hey."

Jodi grimaced. "You drove back? Was there ice on the roads?"

"Not too bad." She shrugged it off and stood, sliding her hands into her back pockets. "Zack and Paige ran to get McDonald's."

Their chosen hangover food. Which is what Jodi had. A hangover.

Strange. Almost like a rite of passage.

"How are you feeling?" Lucy asked.

"Like death. You didn't have to drive back. The *cavalry* had already arrived." She dragged her wet hair up into a ponytail, meeting Lucy's eyes in the mirror.

She pressed her lips together. "Julian said you were alone in a bathroom, barely coherent."

Jodi bristled at the accusation, but Lucy's eyes were sad. The meaning of it swept over Jodi in a horrified rush. Freshman year, before she'd known Lucy well—the wrong party, the wrong drink.

Lucy met her eyes. "I wish someone had driven two hours for me."

She moved quickly through the door to the bathroom. It clicked closed. Jodi felt the echo of it for what felt like forever.

The enormous stupidity of what she'd done flooded her, and she sat in the chair Lucy had slept in to gather her thoughts. Oliver and Nikita had taken care of her a bit, but not really. She didn't have anyone at that party looking out for her. Not once had she considered that she needed to pour her own drinks or only drink from closed containers. She'd been surrounded by strangers when she drank for the first time, not knowing how she'd react to it. She assumed that the way she felt last night had been "drunk" and not "drugged," but how would she have known the difference?

Jodi grabbed her phone and left the bedroom before Lucy reemerged. She took the curving stairs down to the living room and texted Rosa, verifying Zack's story. Rosa responded right away with a million questions

Jodi tried to keep up with. Still staring down at her phone, she reached into the fridge for a bottle of water—

“Do the Pellegrino.”

She spun. Julian was sliding the glass door closed behind him, towel tossed over a shoulder and swim trunks still dripping on the mat.

“Better to settle your stomach,” he said and disappeared into the bathroom off the kitchen.

Jodi took the Pellegrino, twisted the cap, and sat at the kitchen table sipping the fizzing water until the front door opened. The idea of McDonald’s made her stomach roil, but as soon as Paige dropped the bags in front of her, the smell alone could have solved all the world’s problems.

She ate a hash brown slowly as Paige slathered a couple of hotcakes with butter and syrup.

“How’s your stomach?” Zack asked.

Jodi nodded and declined Paige’s offer for half her plate. “It’s fine. How was Napa?”

“Good.” Zack pulled out the chair across from her. “Julian’s cousins had a party that was pretty nice.”

Jodi sipped her Pellegrino, wondering how drunk Julian had still been when he was driving twice the speed limit to get them back to Sacramento.

Lucy emerged and grabbed a breakfast sandwich, slipping onto a stool at the kitchen island. When Julian joined them, fully dressed and hair half-dry, he declined the junk food, grabbing a banana instead. Once he had pulled himself up onto the kitchen counter, Paige turned to her.

“So babe, what’s with the change of heart? I mean, you know me—I love drinking at parties. So there’s no judgment from me, but why?”

Jodi paused in peeling melted cheese off the sandwich wrapper. She thought of Oliver and his friends, calling her their lapdog. Zack not inviting her over for Christmas like he usually did. The way no one had spoken to her for almost a week.

And the clear image of them playing Ride or Die with Emily. As if she’d been there herself. Only ... she hadn’t. She’d been purposefully excluded.

She cleared her throat. “No reason, really. I guess I shouldn’t have gone overboard the first time though.” She caught Julian’s heavy gaze and looked away with a shrug.

“Hey, I’d love to get drunk with you sometime,” Lucy said, almost too casually. “If it’s something you wanna do again, we can do something low-key. Just the five of us.”

Zack nodded. “Totally. If you felt like you had to be the sober one for our sakes, or something, I’m sorry. If I’d known you were interested in getting buzzed, I would—”

“So this is like an intervention,” Jodi snapped. “I finally do something normal kids do, and you all need to have an AA meeting about it.” She crumpled the wax paper and crossed her arms.

Zack’s eyes were wide, dumbstruck. Paige cracked a knuckle and said, “You did something uncharacteristic, and we’re concerned. That’s all.”

“We just want you to know that we’re here for you,” Lucy added.

“If I’d known the only way to get you guys to hang out with me again was to fuck up, I would have careened off course months ago.” She felt rage boil over. She wished she had a car, so she could just walk out like they did in the movies. Make them think about what they’d done.

But instead Lucy’s brows were raised. Paige’s eyes narrowed in on her as Zack’s mouth opened and closed.

“So this was a big cry for attention?” Julian spoke up for the first time. He popped the last of the banana into his mouth and chewed slowly.

She felt something inside of her snap. “When you all decided to invite Emily Mills to play Ride or Die, was that your idea of Thrashing her?”

She looked over their stunned faces. Zack was the first to look away from her. Lucy checked in with Julian before clearing her throat. “What are you talking about?”

“I know you played Ride or Die with Emily in April, and so does the prosecution.”

Julian leaned back, resting his head on a cabinet and closing his eyes in defeat.

Paige stuttered. “Okay, so ... from what I remember, you weren’t free. I think you had to go home or something. We didn’t like, exclude you on purpose.”

Paige’s expression looked earnest, but Jodi knew that she had no plans in her life that didn’t revolve around being available for the four people in this room.

Zack ran a hand through his hair. “Yeah, I think we did play Ride or Die with her. You made it pretty clear that you don’t like that game. So yes, when we were hanging out, I guess we assumed it would be okay to play a game without you—”

“Look, I’m sure there’s tons of things I’m not included in. Especially these days.” She swallowed. “I’ve accepted that you guys don’t want me around all the time. I’m not Emily. I can take a fucking hint.”

Paige reached out her hand, brows scrunching in concern. “Wait, Jodi —”

“I get it, okay? Just don’t lie to me about it.” She set her Pellegrino down with too much force. “Never mind. I just want you guys to know that there’s an eyewitness to that, and it didn’t look good from the outside.”

“Who?”

Jodi snapped her head toward the voice. Lucy had been quick to ask.

“I can’t tell you that.”

The silence in the kitchen was too loud.

Jodi wondered if she could just walk away now. She’d done her duty as a friend. She’d warned them. But she needed to ask one more thing.

“Who was driving?” she said quietly. “When Emily was on the hood?”

Zack’s eyes looked between her and the rest of them. Paige shifted on her feet. Lucy stared back at her with cool eyes.

“We can’t tell you that—”

“It was me.”

Jodi’s body turned toward Julian, perched on the counter. His arms were crossed over his chest, and his mouth was tight.

“You don’t even have to ask,” he said. “You know it was me.”

She felt something sputter inside her chest, like an engine trying and failing to turn over.

Paige looked between Jodi and Julian, eyes quick and nervous, and Jodi reexamined Julian’s lazy posture and tilted head. Casual. Challenging.

“Look,” Lucy said, “I apologize if you feel I, personally, have been absent, but I’m spending every waking moment I have worrying about what happens after graduation. I’m sorry, but I don’t have time to coddle your feelings when a dead girl’s diary is about to send me to juvie for bludgeoning her with a soda bottle.”

Jodi's eyes shifted away from Julian and focused on Lucy. "You got the details on your assault charge? What did it say?"

Zack jerked out of his awkward stupor. "Don't—"

"Jodi, that's the issue." Lucy shook her head. "I *can't* talk about the biggest thing going on in my life with you. Not when you're testifying."

But that wasn't what she was fixating on. "What about a bottle?"

There was a still silence, and then Paige whispered, "Go on. She's gonna hear it from the legal team soon anyway."

Lucy rubbed her face and seemed to deflate, curled over herself.

"According to Emily's journal, last year I drove up on Emily walking home from the bus and hurled a bottle of Coke at her."

"It's assault with a deadly weapon," Zack said.

"Which I don't get. Can you really kill a person with a soda?"

"If it's a full bottle, I guess..."

But Jodi wasn't listening. The sun flickering on the pool water snatched her gaze, like a phantom beckoning her to come closer.

"*You can tell me anything.*" Emily's eyes were unblinking.

"*There's nothing to say. It was an accident.*" Jodi stuffed her books in her backpack, ready to bolt.

"*It's a really big bruise. Jodi, if you don't tell me that you're okay, I'm going to have to talk to a guidance counselor about it.*"

Jodi stared down at her, seated at the library table and twisting her fingers around each other. "Are you fucking insane?" she hissed. "Maybe I don't feel comfortable talking to you about it."

She moved quickly through the library tables, past the computer lab, and out toward the bus stop. She had to take her backpack off her left shoulder, having forgotten about the pain.

When she slid onto the sticky leather bus seats, Emily was there within seconds, joining her. "I'm sorry. I just care about you. I don't think a lot of people care about you."

Jodi glared at her open and honest gaze. "I'm fine, Emily. I would like it if you respected my boundaries, okay?"

Jodi held her backpack to her stomach as the bus gasped and took off. Emily faced her in their two-person seat. It was quiet for two stops.

"Does Zack know?" Emily asked.

"Yes. A little."

*Maybe it was the way Emily was pinning her to the bus seat or the echo of the words, I don't think a lot of people care about you, that did it.*

*"My dad doesn't hit me," Jodi whispered. "He's never hit me or grabbed me. But when he's drunk he throws things. He has a shockingly good aim."*

*"He throws things at you."*

*"No, he—he throws things because he's angry or frustrated or the team is losing. And more often than not, the thing in his hand is his beer."*

*"A beer can gave you that bruise?"*

*"Bottle."*

*Emily's eyes were bright. Jodi was ready to stare out the window and ignore her, but then Emily said, "How did your mom die?"*

*Jodi's head snapped to her, and Emily looked like she understood her—like everything fell into place.*

*"He didn't kill her. What kind of person asks if your dad killed your mom? Jesus, Emily—"*

*"I'll protect you," Emily said, and Jodi felt like she'd inched closer, maybe even under her skin now. "How did she die?"*

*"She drowned. She fell asleep in the bathtub. Are you happy now?"*

*Jodi heard a buzzing in her ears, coalescing into conversation. The Thrashers' pool winked at her.*

*"—can't even prove it. I don't know why this is on the table."*

*"They said there's an eyewitness, so..." Lucy rubbed her brow.*

*"It's Reagan," Jodi said.*

*Four pairs of eyes turned on her.*

*"What?"*

*"It's Reagan. She told me she was the eyewitness." Paige's fingers lifted to her mouth, greasy from the hashbrowns. Lucy furrowed her brow.*

*"Lucy, what day was it?" Jodi said, pulling out her phone.*

*"May 3."*

*She flipped through the videos she'd taken from the journal in the wall, but the last entry was in April. She still didn't know why Emily had stopped writing in this journal the month before she died, but if the police were going off an entry in May from the journal *they* had, she was even more convinced that their journal was fake. There would be no corroboration from the journal in the wall about Lucy's assault charge.*

Jodi looked up at her friends, the people who'd come running at her first big mistake. Jodi felt her insides twist in hot anger at how Emily had pulled that secret out of her and then used it to hurt her friends. She needed to talk this out with someone.

"Julian, will you drive me home?"

She ignored the electricity of stunned silence that coursed through the group, staring at Julian with intent in her eyes. Despite his confession that he was behind the wheel, she didn't trust anyone else with this yet.

Zack opened his mouth, and closed it. Julian slid off the counter and went to grab his keys without a word.

"I'm fine," Jodi said to the rest of them. "I'm really glad you came for me. Lucy, I'm sorry to hear about this. I'm gonna do all I can to help you."

Lucy tilted her head at her in confusion, but Jodi just said goodbye and met Julian at the door. He unlocked his truck, and she climbed up into the passenger seat. She thought she should probably thank him for rallying the troops last night, but instead, she waited until they were out of the driveway before saying, "My dad threw a bottle at me once. A glass beer bottle. It left a bruise on my shoulder and probably could have done a lot more damage."

His fingers tightened on the steering wheel, but he said nothing, keeping his eyes on the road.

"And the only person I ever told this to—before now—was Emily."

Julian's lips twisted into a wry smile, a soft laugh pushing out of him. He ran a hand over his neck and said, "Oh, that crazy little bitch."

She watched his mind work, his eyes darting over the street and his fingers tapping the steering wheel.

"There's more."

"There always is."

"In the Millses' upstairs bathroom, there's a broken tile in the wall. Behind it is a second journal. It's Emily's. The police have a fake."

The truck pulled up to a stoplight. There was no indication that Julian heard her, aside from the tightening of his jaw and the focus in his eyes.

"So, Emily made a fake journal before killing herself?" he asked.

"Emily, or maybe her sister. Her parents. I don't know."

The light turned, and he seemed not to notice until the car behind them honked. He pressed the gas.

"How do you know about this second journal?"

“I went over there and found it while I was looking around,” Jodi said.

He glanced at her then, searching her face. “So, why haven’t you told the police about it?”

“Because Emily’s phone is also hiding there,” she said. His knuckles turned white. “I checked it. I couldn’t find what you texted her. But I’m not sure the police won’t be able to.”

She watched him as he turned into her aunt’s neighborhood, waiting for him to say something. When they pulled up in front of Rosa’s, she didn’t move to unbuckle.

“Are you gonna tell me what you sent to her?” she said.

He watched the neighbor kids playing on a tire swing and ignored her question. “Why’d you tell me all this?”

“Because I wanted someone besides me to know that we can’t trust anything in that journal.”

He nodded, and his eyes slid over to her. She stared at him carefully.

“Were you really driving that car?”

A muscle tensed in his cheek before he responded, “I already told you I was.” He reached for his unlock button. The car clicked. “Later, Dillon.”

Case No. 4512420

Excerpt from the journal of Emily Mills

Entered into evidence 6.08.2024 by Det. Chelsea Harding

**MAY 3, 2024**

**I CAN'T BELIEVE I'M EVEN WRITING THIS. BUT SOMEONE THREW SOMETHING AT ME TODAY.**

**MY HANDS ARE STILL SHAKING. I GOT OFF THE BUS EARLY SO I COULD GRAB A SNACK AT THE MARKET, AND WHEN I WAS WALKING ALONE DOWN 40TH OR ONE OF THOSE STREETS, I HEARD A CAR COME UP BEHIND ME. I WASN'T SCARED OR ANYTHING. I JUST THOUGHT IT WAS NORMAL.**

**BUT THEN I HEARD IT SLOW DOWN. AND BEFORE I COULD TURN OVER MY SHOULDER, I HEARD A CRASH AND FELT SOMETHING SPLATTER MY LEG. IT WAS A SODA BOTTLE. ONE OF THOSE GLASS ONES. ONE OF THE SHARDS NICKED ME AND I WAS BLEEDING A LITTLE. WHEN I LOOKED UP, THE CAR WAS SQUEALING AWAY, AND I COULD BARELY CHECK THE LICENSE PLATE OR ANYTHING.**

**BUT I THINK I HEARD THEM LAUGHING.**

**WHY WOULD SOMEONE DO THAT? I'M CRYING AND SHAKING AND I WANT TO SCREAM. WHY WOULD SOMEONE THROW GLASS AT ME? WHAT IF THEY HIT ME?**

**AND THE WORST PART IS—I THINK I RECOGNIZED THE CAR. I THINK IT WAS LUCY REED.**

**I CAN'T BE SURE. I CAN'T THINK OF ANYTHING BUT THE SOUND OF THE GLASS CRACKING AGAINST THE SIDEWALK AND THE WAY I JUMPED OUT OF MY SKIN. BUT IT WAS DEFINITELY A BLACK CAR. I THINK A JEEP.**

**HOW DO I ASK LUCY REED IF SHE THREW A BOTTLE AT ME? AND WORSE, HOW DO I ASK IF SHE MEANT TO HURT ME?**

# Chapter Twenty-One

FEBRUARY

The requirements for a séance were simpler than Jodi would have thought. No solstice needed, not even a full moon. Jodi had approached Paige at her locker on the first day back to school.

“Do you still want to try talking to Emily?”

“Yes,” Paige had replied instantly, her eyes wide and hungry. “You’ll join me?”

Jodi sighed. The texts hadn’t stopped, and the numbers kept changing. Just yesterday Zack got one wishing him luck on an exam. Jodi was still having unsettling dreams, and Lucy and Paige had their sleep paralysis. Not to mention the trials.

“I want to know what Emily wants,” Jodi said. “I want to know if she can clarify why these things are happening.”

Paige nodded, agreeing. “Same.”

“And you don’t want to go back to Nan?” Jodi asked.

“I want to go to the rose garden. She told us to go there.” Paige walked with her to their next class. “I’ve been doing a lot more research on all of it. I was gonna go without you all, but if you’re in...”

“We’ll all go,” Jodi said. “We have to do this together.”

Unfortunately, Jodi learned, the reason Paige knew so much about this was because Kiera’s older sister was a practicing Wiccan. It was Kiera who Paige had been getting her research from, inviting her to lunch, quizzing her on the spirit world.

A week later, the five of them and Kiera sat at Burr’s. Kiera would be joining them as their “guide” or whatever. Jodi met Julian’s eyes over the

table, giving him a look she hoped conveyed *You were supposed to take care of this.*

But here Kiera was, smiling and sipping her milkshake, letting Zack steal her fries.

Julian slurped his iced tea and lifted an innocent brow at Jodi. When they'd gotten back to school for their final semester of senior year, Jodi was surprised to find Julian in three of her classes. Paige was still in English with her, but Julian was in economics, second-semester anatomy, and her sign language elective. When sign language let out into a five-minute crossing period before anatomy, he didn't pack up and run off. He waited and walked with her, showing her the dirty signs he'd learned already.

Now, while Kiera told them instructions, Julian signed to her—*Who, me?*

She glared as Lucy interrupted Kiera's prattling.

"So we show up, we hold hands, and she 'comes to us.'" Lucy tilted her head. "What the fuck does that mean?"

Kiera coughed. "Well, sometimes the spirit may interact with the world around us, so we're going to bring a Ouija board in case she wants to use it. But Paige tells me she communicates with light?" She looked to Paige for confirmation.

"Yeah, she can control streetlamps," Paige said, as if that was normal.

"Okay, so if we're in the rose garden, then we'll just be within view of a streetlamp—"

"One blink for yes, two for no?" Jodi added drily.

Kiera shrugged. "Maybe!" She smiled brightly and stole her milkshake straw back from Zack.

"How many séances have you done, Kiera?" Julian leaned forward in his chair, mocking her with his attention.

"Well, not strictly a séance, but I've sat in on summoning with my sister and her coven."

"So, this is your first."

"Uh-huh!" She beamed. Her eyes were obnoxiously green.

"That's so exciting for you!" Lucy trilled in condescending enthusiasm.

"Luce," Zack warned. Kiera just smiled between them, unable to read the room.

“What do you need from us?” Zack flagged over Mr. Burr for the check. “Do we need to do anything to prepare ourselves?”

“I guess, have an open mind? I dunno.” She shrugged. “But this will be super interesting. I didn’t get to meet Emily since I moved here after she died, but obviously my whole class talks about her!”

Jodi narrowed her eyes. She already knew about Kiera being a transfer student. Lucy and Paige had done a full background check on Kiera when Zack started hanging out with her. But Jodi didn’t like this chipper enthusiasm for “meeting” Emily. As if she was being initiated somehow.

Lucy leveled a stare at Kiera that made her shrivel. “You do understand that no one can know what we’re doing or find out what happens tomorrow night.”

“Yeah! Yeah, got it. I don’t want you guys in any more trouble.”

Jodi met Lucy’s eyes as Kiera asked Zack for the crusts of his turkey sandwich. Julian shifted in the chair across from her. For the first time, Jodi realized what it was like to live inside Paige, Lucy, and Julian’s heads, knowing that this girl had to go.

She had to be Thrashed.



Rosa always said that Sacramento had the best kind of Februaries. No snow, but just cold enough to bundle up. As someone who had only seen her first snow two years ago, Jodi disagreed. But she was thankful now that the forty-degree evening in the rose garden wouldn’t drop to eighteen degrees while they were there.

She wore two pairs of leggings, UGG knockoffs, and three layers on top with a beanie around her ears.

Julian scanned her up and down. “You look like you’re about to rob a bank.”

She glared back at him and tugged the beanie off her head under the pretense of straightening her hair, and then never put it back on. She slipped into the back seat of Zack’s car beside Paige.

Lucy had offered to pick up Kiera, something that surprised Zack, but he didn’t argue. Jodi had the feeling that Kiera was about to get a taste of

what it's like to be on Lucy Reed's bad side, and she didn't even feel bad about it.

They pulled up on the other side of McKinley, a lush park that sprawled two square blocks, with a library, a pond, tennis courts, a castle for a jungle gym, and—on the south side—a rose garden. They parked next to the tennis courts and made sure to keep quiet for the nosy neighbors who always had eyes on the unhoused population inching east from the freeway on-ramps.

It was almost one, and the traffic from H Street, the thoroughfare on the south side, was dying down. Paige led them to the spot she had in mind, a patch of dirt where the pathways in the garden converged. This was the place the five of them and Emily had smoked pot last year. It was within sight of a streetlamp.

"If she wanted us to 'go to the rose garden,' then this is what she meant." Paige plopped down and crossed her legs.

Jodi walked down the center aisle, trying to read the descriptions of the flowers. Zack joined her after a second.

"So, what do you think of her?"

Jodi's molars ground together. "Who?"

"Kiera. Come on."

She moved down to the next row. "Honestly? I don't think you should be dating *anybody* until the trial is over. It's not a good look, Zack."

"You're right. I know you are. But..." He smiled wistfully. "I like her."

"Be serious!" she snapped. "You're under investigation for statutory rape. You're eighteen, Kiera is seventeen. End of story."

His face twisted up before he nodded at the ground, and Jodi's heart sank.

"She's sixteen, isn't she?"

"Birthday in May."

"It doesn't matter."

"Look"—he pushed his hand through his hair—"I don't have to sleep with her! I just wanna go out with her. Date her."

Jodi buried the stab of pain and turned to face him, crossing her arms. "And what happens if it doesn't go well?" His brows drew together and she clarified, "What happens if she gets Thrashed before the trial?"

He let out an exasperated sigh. "*Thrashed*. What does that even mean? Fucking stupid word."

“It means something to the people who’ve been Thrashed,” she said. “To the people who feel like we use them up and throw them away.”

“But we don’t do that.”

“Don’t we?” A night breeze rustled up Jodi’s hair, and she resisted the urge to tug her beanie back on. “Were we going to keep hanging out with Emily after the school year? There are people telling everyone who will listen that we bullied and hurt them. Your old bio partner. Reagan—”

“Reagan has been out to get Lucy for years. These people are jealous or something.”

Jodi felt like there was a chasm yawning between them as he stood playing with the only yellow rosebud that had survived the winter. It broke off in his fingertips.

“They’ve found a pattern, Zack. When it’s a pattern, there’s only so long you can point blame somewhere else.” She walked back to where Paige was trying to meditate among the dormant rosebushes.

Two figures crossed the grass in the distance, the smaller one carrying a large tote bag, like they were going on a picnic. Whatever had transpired between Lucy and Kiera, it didn’t affect the younger girl’s beaming smile when she reached them. Paige helped Kiera unpack her bag—a few crystals, a bundle of sage they couldn’t light, and a Ouija board bought from Target.

Jodi took a seat on Kiera’s right. Zack sat on the other side of Jodi—much to Kiera’s dismay—and Lucy and Julian sat on his other side. Paige made sure she had a good view of the closest streetlamp before sitting between Kiera and Julian.

“Okay, so like, the *biggest* thing,” Kiera started, her voice all California valley inflections, “is that everyone has to be *united*. So if anyone thinks this is *stupid* or that Emily won’t actually talk to us, you have to like, get rid of that.”

Julian mimed tugging something out of his temple and tossing it away.

“Right. So, like, take a moment to center yourself, set an intention for what you want out of the communication.”

Paige’s eyes shut tight like she was praying. Lucy let her gaze soften on the crystals and sage in the center of them. Jodi concentrated on the wind. It was nice that it wasn’t raining, but the chill was still there, seeping under her layers of clothing and freezing her spine.

She'd faced the medium, and she hadn't expected that to work. But she believed Nan had the ability to connect to the spirit world, and she believed that Emily was still trying to connect.

And she had questions.

Sooner than she expected, Kiera broke their silence.

"Now, we have to join hands and concentrate on Emily." She opened her palm to Jodi with a smile, and Jodi tried to return it as Kiera crisscrossed their fingers—much more intimate than Jodi would have preferred. Her fingers laced through Zack's on her right.

Jodi glanced to the street, searching for any late-night joggers or patrolling police cars. Her eyes caught on the streetlamp, and she waited for it to blink at her. Nothing. She looked to Paige and found her waiting for the exact same thing.

"So think of her, picture her. Imagine her presence here with us." Kiera's voice was almost soothing in the dark.

Jodi's thoughts turned inward. She imagined Emily as she'd last seen her. The day before prom at their lockers, asking about the limo. She'd thought in the moment that it was possible Emily assumed she was riding with them. In hindsight, she should have bit the bullet. Jodi regretted a lot about that last month with Emily, but not having the courage for that hard conversation was at the top of the list.

Kiera's lower tone broke through Jodi's thoughts—"Emily, are you with us?"

Jodi's eyes snapped to the streetlamp. She waited, counting her heartbeats.

"Emily, show us you're with us."

The streetlamp remained on. Jodi searched for other lamps further away and found no activity.

"Maybe we'll grab the Ouija board," Kiera said to Paige. Jodi felt Kiera's grasp on her hand loosen.

The streetlamp went out, plunging them into darkness.

Paige's gasp was soft. Jodi felt the crisp tension between her fingers like electricity. And she realized that it wasn't only the closest streetlamp that had dimmed. Every lamp on H Street was out. Only the moon lit them.

"Ooookay," Lucy's skeptical voice came from across the circle.

“Emily, are you here with us?” Kiera asked. Her palm was sweating in Jodi’s grip. She could hear her breath shake out of her, the moonlight glowing on the mist of it.

No flicker from the lamps.

Paige sucked in cold air. “Emily, you told me we were safe when I asked you in Nan’s salon. Is that still true?”

Kiera hummed next to her in the dark. “Safe?” Jodi’s brows drew together as she listened to Kiera’s voice. “Maybe.”

Melodic. Like a song. Like Emily’s voice had been.

“Not talking to you,” Julian said, tension in his throat.

“No one’s ever talking to me,” Kiera replied. “Only about me. Isn’t that what you said?”

Kiera’s gaze slid up Julian’s torso like water moving the wrong way.

Julian’s eyes narrowed on her. “You did know her, didn’t you?” he said.

“What’s going on?” said Zack, from Jodi’s right.

“Let’s get back to it,” Lucy’s voice was tight. “Emily, can you hear us?”

“Yes,” Kiera said softly.

“She can? You can tell?”

Jodi turned to Kiera and watched her head pivot to Lucy. Her brown hair fell in thick sheets down the sides of her face, and her posture sagged into something curving and inverted.

“Yes.”

Jodi saw Kiera’s intent eyes, reflecting brightly in the moonlight—

Blue. As the morning sky.

Jodi’s chest rose sharply. She felt the cold air seep in deep. Her fingers tried to pull from Kiera’s hand, and then Emily Mills’s eyes landed on her for the first time in nine months.

Kiera’s nose was longer. Her hair and brows dark. Her teeth almost too small. But there was ice in her eyes and a bright greediness in them that drew the air from Jodi’s body.

“Hi,” Kiera whispered.

“What the fuck,” Zack muttered next to her.

But Jodi couldn’t turn to him. Couldn’t move her head. Couldn’t move her arm. Like waking up in bed feeling something sitting on your chest, or sleeping on your arm until it was completely numb.

Kiera smiled at her.

“Don’t break the circle,” Paige said suddenly. “Not until we’re done.”

“She’s—” Zack stuttered. “We have to—”

“No, don’t.”

Jodi watched as Emily’s blue eyes slid over to Zack. Breaking her trance, Jodi searched the rest of the circle. The lights weren’t back on, but she could make out Lucy’s measured breathing, the stillness of Julian’s posture, Paige’s slow rocking.

“Emily, I have a question,” Paige stated slowly.

Kiera’s head swiveled like that of a doll. She waited.

“What did you write in your journal?”

“Only the truth.”

“I never threw a soda bottle at you, Emily,” Lucy hissed.

“I know.” Kiera’s voice was pitched high and airy.

“What is it about this place?” Paige cut in. “Why did you tell us to go to the rose garden?”

She seemed to think about it. “I didn’t.”

“Do you want revenge, Emily?” Zack finally found his voice.

“For what?”

“Cut the shit.” Tension rolled off Julian in waves. “The drive-in. The inhaler. Paige and me getting hurt. You want revenge, don’t you?”

It was the first time Julian had accepted that anything supernatural was going on. Jodi watched him shift under Emily’s gaze.

“Why would I want to hurt my friends?” Kiera smiled, glancing at each face in the circle. “It’s nice to be back with my friends.”

A choked sound came from Lucy’s throat, and Jodi saw there were tears falling gently down her cheeks.

“Why did you write about a soda bottle, Emily?” Jodi whispered. Kiera rotated back to her. Jodi couldn’t feel her fingertips, like her blood flow stopped at her wrist. “You know that wasn’t your story to tell.”

“You’re right. *You* should tell it,” Kiera’s voice sang. “That’s one thing she and I agree on, actually.”

Jodi felt frozen, like the winter wind had slithered in through her mouth and taken root inside her lungs. Her arm went numb, up to her elbow.

She looked down and only saw Kiera’s fingers tightly wrapped around her own.

“I’ll protect you.” Emily’s words seemed to float down to her. Jodi raised her eyes. “I’ll protect you from everyone.”

There was an echo reverberating in Jodi’s head. Hissing and shouting floated into one ear and out the other as she tried to focus on the echo. Kiera leaned in toward her, and Jodi watched Emily’s eyes as her voice sang, “She wants you to go to Rosa’s.”

Jodi was at the far end of a tunnel, holding Emily’s hand in the darkness, and her friends were screaming on the other side. Like running at full speed at a brick wall, sound and awareness broke across her.

“—the fuck away from her!”

“Stop it!”

“—swear to god I’ll—”

“Shh!”

“Don’t let go—”

Kiera’s eyes rolled back in her head. She blinked once, and her eyes were green. She fell backward into a rosebush, eyes closing as she fainted.

Jodi was ripped from the ground, uprooted. Arms wound around her chest and placed her on her feet, taking her away.

Her legs folded under her, and the cold wind that had planted itself like a garden inside her chest was rushing upward—

She gagged, vomiting on the grass. Her left arm swung lifeless at her side, her other bracing herself on a tree.

A large, warm hand rubbed her back, pushing her hair away from her face. The others were shushing and gasping just feet away, but Zack was with her.

She sniffed, wheezing and dry heaving. When she straightened, her gaze roved up a water polo team sweatshirt—Julian.

“You okay? What did she say to you?”

Jodi looked over her shoulder. Zack had Kiera pulled to his chest. She was shaking, her sobbing getting louder as Paige hushed them. Lucy was packing up the Ouija board and crystals with unsteady hands.

“You shouldn’t have broken the circle,” Paige hissed at Julian.

“Are you fucking kidding?” Zack turned on her. “We should have stopped this the second Kiera—”

“Shut up.” Lucy hefted the tote bag on her shoulder. “We have to go.”

Jodi blinked her eyes clear and saw the streetlamps were on. Kiera was sobbing and gasping, making too much noise. She remembered the sounds of them arguing just before Emily disappeared.

*She wants you to go to Rosa's.*

Jodi pushed it from her mind and refocused on Lucy running across the park with the bag, Paige following, and Zack taking Kiera's wrist to stumble after them. She was tugged. She looked down.

Julian had her hand in his, taking her toward the cars on the other side of the park. She couldn't feel it.

"My—my hand is numb. My whole arm." Her voice shook.

He stopped and looked down. He pinched her forearm and she felt it like a caress. But her hand was still like a dead fish, flopping in his grip.

Red and blue lights flared from H Street. She saw Julian's face—blue, then red—for only a second before he took her other hand and ran.

She stumbled to keep pace with him, darting around the playground. Shadows moved in the darkness, sleeping people waking and packing before the cops came.

Lucy's car was starting on the opposite street. Zack's was nowhere to be found.

Paige spotted them first, gesturing to them from the passenger seat of Lucy's car to run faster. Julian threw open the back door, Jodi crawled inside, and Julian's feet had barely cleared the cement before the car jerked forward, driving like a getaway car.

"What happened?" Paige and Jodi said at the same time.

Paige continued, "What was she saying to you? You looked horrified."

"She—she..." Jodi took a deep breath. A laugh barked out of her. "She claims she's talking to my mom." She laughed again, the sound breaking off as tears sprung behind her eyes.

It was silent for a moment, and then she realized she was shaking—being shaken. She looked down and Julian was rolling her arm between his hands like kindling ready to catch fire against flint.

"She can't feel her arm," he explained.

"What?" Lucy looked at them in the rearview. Paige twisted in her seat.

Jodi tasted the vomit in the back of her mouth still. "What happened back there?"

There was a pause. “Those were her eyes,” Lucy said. “You know they were.”

They were quiet except for the sound of Julian’s palms sliding up and down Jodi’s sleeve. Her fingers pricked to life.

When they got to the Thrashers’ house and Zack’s car wasn’t there, Julian started calling him.

Jodi slid her phone from her pocket.

Twenty-three texts. Seventeen missed calls.

Her eyes scanned for anything from Zack, finding nothing. But her dad, Rosa, even Oliver Burns had called and texted.

Jodi’s pulse raced. Paige and Lucy were talking to her but she couldn’t focus as she picked one of the numbers and dialed them back.

“Jo, where are you?” Her dad’s voice was tight. People were speaking in the background.

“What’s wrong?”

“Where are you? Are you safe?”

“Yeah, I’m—I’m safe. What happened?”

“It was an accident, Jo. I tried to cook up some dinner and—” His voice cut off. She heard sirens in the background. “And I must have fallen asleep while waiting.”

There were three working burners on the stove. She checked all four every night before bed.

“What happened, Dad?”

“It was an accident, Jodi, I swear.” His voice was slurring, thick and heavy.

She wanted to stamp her foot. She needed answers, not apologies.

Julian was watching her as Lucy and Paige paced, dialing Zack and Kiera over and over.

A voice through her phone: “Sir, I need you to come back to the ambulance. We need to continue checking your vitals.”

“This is my fucking daughter, alright?!” said her dad.

Jodi hung up, dialing Oliver. He picked up before the first ring was over.

“Are you alright? Where are you?” he asked.

“Oliver, what’s going on? What happened?”

A breathy laugh rumbled into her ear, quickly turning into a cough. “Your dad burned down half your house. It jumped over to mine just before

the fire trucks arrived.”

Jodi couldn’t breathe. She sat down in the middle of the Thrashers’ driveway. “Is anyone hurt?”

“No. It’s just like ... smoke in our lungs and stuff. Jo, your dad is ... I’m surprised he can even stand up straight right now.”

She nodded, even though he couldn’t see her, and squeezed her eyes shut. She thanked him and called Rosa back, letting her rant to her as tears fell down her cheeks.

*She wants you to go to Rosa’s.*

It felt like admitting defeat. Like saying, *I couldn’t hack it on my own.* But she sniffed back her tears and said, “Rosa, can I move in with you and Grandma?”

She didn’t say “until the house is repaired” or “until the end of the school year.” She just let it hang on a string, a note played in a different key.

“Of course. Where are you? I’ll pick you up.”

Jodi reminded her where Zack lived and hung up. Paige was explaining that Zack took Kiera home and made sure she was okay. Lucy reached to help her stand up from the driveway, and Jodi let her. She couldn’t meet Julian’s eye when she said there was a fire on her street, and her aunt was on the way to pick her up.

“Oh, my god, Jodi!” Paige gasped. “Is your dad okay?”

“Yeah,” was all she said.

When Jodi squeezed into Rosa’s front seat, Zack still wasn’t home. She listened to Rosa’s tirade about her father, letting the words wash over her, and wishing she could blame this on Emily somehow. Somehow Emily had started a fire and tried to kill her dad.

But she knew it wasn’t true. There were enough demons without Emily.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

When Rosa took her by her house the next day to pack some clothes, Jodi saw the damage for the first time. The left side of her house was charred, the siding blackened. The bushes between their house and the Burnses' were crisped. She could see where the fire had jumped to the other house, and her heart dropped when she realized it was Oliver's bedroom.

Thankfully, it looked like only the outside had been damaged. The Burnses had evacuated early enough, and the fire trucks had arrived quickly.

Caution tape wound around her house, and she had to duck under it to wedge her key in the lock. The fire had crept toward the living room, lighting up the carpet and singeing her father's favorite chair. Jodi imagined him still in it, drunkenly dozing while the smoke choked him to death. She shook her head clear of the nightmare and turned down the hall toward her bedroom.

Aside from the smoke, her room was clear. The fire hadn't come this far. She grabbed everything important and filled a duffel bag with all the clothes she could.

Her dad was discharged from the hospital that morning. He'd needed to sober up and get his lungs tested, and if he experienced any hoarseness or difficulty breathing he was supposed to come in immediately. They'd talked on the phone that morning, and every apology felt like a weight on Jodi's chest. He wouldn't stop saying sorry. Jodi knew it was an accident, but it also wouldn't have happened if he hadn't been piss-drunk.

“I’m glad you’re staying with Rosa,” he’d said. “I think that’s for the best until the insurance company comes through with the money for repairs.”

Jodi had just agreed.

While she put together a puzzle with her grandma, Jodi’s mind ran through the séance. Jodi tried to make sense of the way Kiera behaved, trying to make it *not* Emily’s doing.

*She wants you to go to Rosa’s.*

Well, here she was. If her mother wanted her at Rosa’s ...

She wondered if Emily cared about the rose garden at all. Nan had seen a rose during her and Paige’s session. But had it even been Emily?

She called Nan that day, stepping out of Rosa’s kitchen and into the backyard.

“Can you explain possession?”

“Possession?” She could hear Nan shuffling papers and moving around her salon. “Can you be more specific?”

“We ... we tried to communicate with Emily last night, and I think she possessed one of us. She was talking *through* someone.” She didn’t mention the eyes. It wasn’t something she could be sure of.

“Hm. Well, I would say that—” Nan cut off. Jodi almost prompted her when she finally said, “Okay. Emily is here.”

Jodi clenched her jaw.

“She’s curious about a fire?”

“Tell her to fuck off,” Jodi bit out. Then, “Sorry. I’m really, really done with her.”

“Well, she’s not done with you.”

Shivers started down Jodi’s spine. “So it was her last night? Possessing Kiera?”

“She is happy to take credit for it, yes. That’s what I’m getting from her, anyway.”

Jodi swallowed. “Is it going to happen again? Is she ... Does she want to hurt us?”

“I’m not getting that. She’s still very concerned for you. Focused on you.”

That didn’t make her feel any better. “When we first came to see you, you said someone was holding out a rose. Did you think that was Emily?”

“There were a lot of voices,” Nan said. “I wasn’t sure, but someone associated roses with safety.”

Jodi rubbed her eyes. “My aunt’s name is Rosa.”

“Ah. Well, that could be it.”

“So, going to the rose garden wasn’t it.” Jodi scoffed.

Nan paused before saying, “If you’d like to come by and talk about it some more, I could give you ten minutes free...”

“Thanks, but I think I’m done talking to spirits.”

Nan wished her well, and Jodi did the same.

Jodi checked in with the rest of them later that day. Zack said Kiera was freaked. When he’d finally updated the group text, he’d said it took an hour for him to calm her down. He’d checked on her early in the morning, and she said she’d dreamt of Emily all night.

When Monday came, Kiera looked like she’d—well, like she’d seen a ghost. Her eyes were bloodshot and her skin was pale. Jodi tried to approach her to ask if she was okay, but Kiera had swerved to avoid her.

The weeks seemed to pass quickly during the winter. Jodi started work on the backdrop for *West Side Story*, but the rest of the semester was just a countdown to the trials.

The last Monday of February was the beginning of the hearings. Paige dressed in pastel clothes that she’d bought at Marshalls the day before, giving her the look of someone who had never owned a pair of Gucci sunglasses or six Louis Vuitton purses. She pulled her hair back into a ponytail and walked with her gaze down on the sidewalk as the reporters swarmed her at the courthouse steps.

Lucy went next. She wore no makeup. She marched up the steps downtown like someone on a mission. The day before, she’d gotten her rejection letters from both Louisiana and Stanford, despite their offers of early admission in November.

There was little Julian Hollister could do to make himself seem more sympathetic. His lawyer pried his aviators out of his hands and forced his top buttons closed, but he was clearly the same American Eagle model he’d always been.

The three of them pled not guilty. Footage of each of them leaving the courthouse played on all news stations. News trucks clustered around the

high school for over a week, catching snippets of interviews from anyone who wanted their five minutes of fame.

“This isn’t the first time they’ve done something like this, and as sad as I am that Emily is gone, I’m glad there’s a wake-up call here,” said a boy with brown hair and braces that Jodi had never seen before in her life.

Reagan Matthews seemed to be everywhere at once. “It’s called *getting Thrashed*. They’re *the Thrashers*, and what they do is they choose someone to take under their wing, hang out with, cheat off their homework—whatever, and then they *Thrash* them.”

“What does that mean? Specifically?” The reporter turned her mic back to Reagan.

“It means they ruin them. Dump them in the garbage, publicly humiliate them. It happened to me freshman year.”

Jodi pinched the bridge of her nose, wondering if this was what a migraine felt like.

A few weeks after the hearings, Lucy’s uncle told them about a Facebook group called Justice for Emily Mills. It was two thousand members strong and full of opinions about the Emily Mills case. According to the group, the Thrashers were guilty until proven innocent, and even then it wouldn’t be enough.

Paige started getting harassed in the parking lot after school by media crews and “concerned citizens.” The school had to hire outside security to keep them off the grounds. A campaign was organized to get Zack expelled. Jodi suspected that the only thing that kept him in school was Greg and Charity Thrasher’s yearly donations. Lucy was getting out of her car in front of her house one day when someone drove by and threw a glass bottle at her. He’d yelled, “How do you like it?” after the glass shattered at her feet. Julian’s water polo scholarships had been pulled, and almost all of his East Coast colleges had rescinded his admission.

On Jodi’s eighteenth birthday, they had a small get-together at Zack’s house. When she arrived, she thought Paige and Julian just weren’t there yet.

“These are from Paige,” Lucy said, smiling brightly and carrying a Tupperware full of homemade cupcakes.

Jodi blinked. “Oh. Is she...?”

“She wants us to FaceTime her.” Lucy’s smile faltered. “She hasn’t had a good day.”

Jodi’s stomach dropped. “What happened?”

Lucy glanced at Zack, who was in the living room searching for something to watch on Netflix. Zack met her eyes and looked away.

“What happened?” Jodi repeated.

Lucy took a fortifying breath. “We all got texts today. About your birthday.”

Jodi reached for her phone on reflex. “What did they say?”

“All different things,” Lucy said. “Mine asked where the party was at. Paige got sent links for gifts for you. Zack got sent some weird info about a play in San Francisco and then the link for front-row tickets.”

Jodi felt the blood drain from her face. Oliver had told her about a musical playing in San Francisco next month. He’d said the production was using a hand-painted re-creation of Georges Seurat’s *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* on the backdrop instead of a printed screen, and that she should see it. Jodi had looked up tickets just two days ago, searching for promo codes and discounts before finally deciding she couldn’t go.

“So Paige said she didn’t want to risk it,” Lucy concluded.

“What number was it?” Jodi asked, her throat dry and crackling.

As Lucy read it off, Jodi double-checked the unknown number that had texted her “happy birthday” earlier that day. She hadn’t thought anything of it, assuming it was someone she knew in passing whose number she hadn’t saved. But it was the same number.

She stared out the window, wondering if the person sending these texts had overheard Oliver ...

“Hey,” Zack said, appearing in front of her. He rubbed her arm. “It’s okay. We can forget about it for a night. It’s your birthday, Jo.”

Zack grabbed a party horn and blew the paper end into her face until she smiled weakly.

Jodi sat through the movie, trying to figure out the best way to ask Oliver if he knew who was harassing the Thrashers over text without accusing him.

Once Julian had arrived, long past fashionably late, and was sitting next to her on the couch, she said, “Did you get a text from a dead girl today,

too?”

“Yup.” He tossed popcorn into his mouth. She watched his tongue dart out to catch the salt on his lips. “She wanted dick pics though. Weird.”

Jodi snorted and shoved his shoulder.

“I mean, I *obliged*,” Julian said playfully. “She said they were for you, but I don’t know if she’ll share them.”

Jodi bit her lip to keep from smiling. “You think I want pictures of your dick for my birthday?”

He tilted his head to her and said in all sincerity, “Dillon. Of course you do. Everyone does.”

Jodi rolled her eyes, feeling her cheeks grow hot. As they turned their attention back to the TV, Jodi saw Lucy watching them with a lifted brow and a smirk.

Jodi looked away quickly, and Lucy turned back to the TV.



The prosecution finally scheduled a deposition with Jodi in March.

After school, she took the bus down to the courthouse and was ushered into the same room. She sat in an uncomfortable chair and faced down Buechler, Yang, and Detective Harding, only this time she didn’t have a lawyer with her.

“Miss Dillon,” Buechler began without much fanfare. “Were you aware that Julian Hollister texted Emily Mills on the day she died?”

“I was made aware of it in our last interview,” Jodi responded. “But I hadn’t known before then, no.”

“Do you know now what it was that he texted her?”

“All I know is what you’ve told me. A message and a link. I don’t know what either of those were.”

Only Yang looked disappointed. The others had schooled their expressions.

“Who is Oliver Burns?” Buechler asked.

Jodi stared at him, closing her mouth from where it dropped open. “He’s a classmate and my next-door neighbor.”

“Have you ever considered him a friend?”

“Yes,” she said slowly, trying to get ahead of where they were going with this. Had Oliver decided to press charges against Julian after all? “We were very close in middle school, and we’ve just recently become close again.”

“What accounts for the gap?” Buechler’s shoulders gave a small shrug.

“High school. We just started running in different circles, I guess.”

“And your circle was the Thrashers.”

Jodi didn’t answer, not if he wasn’t going to form a question.

“Why didn’t Oliver get to hang out with the Thrashers?”

“Get to?” she repeated. “He didn’t *want* to, I guess. Like I said, we went different ways.”

Harding scratched something on her notes, and Jodi regretted not calling Miranda for this. She was eighteen and she wasn’t being charged with anything, so she hadn’t thought she’d needed a lawyer. Maybe she’d been wrong.

“Do you really think there are any kids at New Helvetia who wouldn’t want to be a Thrasher?” Buechler continued.

Jodi narrowed her eyes. “It’s not a club. I’ve told you before, it’s a friend group. You don’t get an invite or a Skull and Bones hazing. The five of us are friends.”

“But you were friends with Oliver Burns. Why doesn’t he still get to be friends with you once you’re a Thrasher?”

Clenching her jaw, Jodi bit out, “I think you’re twisting things to fit your narrative, when I’ve already told you the answer is as simple as ‘friends grow apart.’”

Buechler had the arrogance to smile at her. “Has Zackary Thrasher ever told you not to hang out with Oliver Burns?”

“No,” she said quickly.

“Has Julian Hollister?”

“No.”

“Has Lucy R—”

“No, and no.”

His lips twitched again, and then he placed both elbows on the table and leveled his gaze at her. “Oliver Burns tells us that Zackary Thrasher and Julian Hollister specifically kept him from speaking to you in freshman year. That Lucy Reed didn’t invite him to a pool party after talking about it

in front of him. That Paige Montgomery asked him to do her hair for freshman year homecoming and then never credited him or even spoke to him at the dance.”

Jodi’s fingertips were buzzing. She’d never heard any of this.

“That you, Jodi,” Buechler said, “stopped talking to him altogether after first semester freshman year.”

Her chest was tight, her air thin. They’d stopped talking, but it was mutual. It’s not like she decided it.

“Oliver Burns claims that he was the first person at New Helvetia High School to be ‘Thrashed’ by the Thrashers.”

“That’s not true,” she snapped. “It may have felt that way to him, but we *never* decided to exclude him. We never purposefully made anyone feel ... ‘Thrashed.’”

The word was thick on her tongue. She shifted in her chair, feeling a slimy sensation in her gut.

“So, you had no knowledge of any of this?” Harding spoke for the first time. “You didn’t know your friends were trying to get rid of Oliver Burns?”

“That’s not what happened. I just told you it wasn’t purposeful.” Her skin was tingling, and it felt like the walls were closer than before.

Harding and Buechler stared at her, as if waiting. When she said nothing else, Buechler gestured to Harding. The detective shuffled her paperwork and read through something briefly.

“Has Emily’s death affected you in particular due to how your mother died?” She looked up from her notes and clicked her pen.

Jodi’s lungs caught. “Excuse me?”

“Were you more affected by Emily’s suicide because of your mother?”

“What does my mother have to do with Emily?”

Harding blinked at her, like she was genuinely taken aback. Jodi felt like there was something she was missing.

“They died in such similar manners. I’m just asking if you were affected by that in particular,” Harding said.

Jodi stared at her. *Similar manners*. She didn’t understand ...

Harding continued softly, “Because your mother died by suicide.”

Her veins turned solid. Her vision blurred and returned.

“My mother drowned.”

Yang looked up. Harding went still. Buechler cleared his throat. "Right," he said, stretching the vowel, "but after an overdose. In the bathtub."

"It wasn't an overdose," Jodi snapped. "She—she'd taken pain pills for her back—she'd been in a car crash a month before—" She knew this story like her own heartbeat. "My mother had a glass of wine to relax in the tub and accidentally fell asleep and slipped under. She drowned."

The click of a pen. Three pairs of eyes burrowing into her like needles under her skin.

"Cause of death was drowning, yes." Detective Harding nodded and turned pages in her folder. "You can't remember it, of course, but it must have been very traumatic to hear about when you were older." Harding's eyes slid up to hers. "You've been told that you were in the tub with her?"

"Yes." Jodi's voice was a thin wire to the other side of the table.

"And your father ... broke down the door when he heard you crying and splashing—"

"I know the story." Her pulse was racing.

"Because she had the door locked," Harding finished softly.

There was something in her gaze underneath her dark fringe. Pity and condescension, like she was explaining something to Jodi.

"My mother drowned. It was an *accident*."

"Did you ever tell Emily how your mother died?"

Jodi couldn't breathe.

The leather on the chair beneath her, sweating just like the bus seats.

Harding's cool eyes searching for something inside of her, like sky blue ones used to.

*I'll protect you.*

"Yes, I did. It was one of the things she pressured me into telling her about myself. She was good at that."

"So you've said." Buechler sat forward. "Did Emily know your mother killed herself?"

"She didn't—"

"You told her the details though? Pills. Wine. Bathtub."

"I did. She pried them out of me."

"Did Emily ever show any ... abnormal interest in how your mother died?"

Jodi squinted. “Abnormal.”

“Did she ask you to repeat the story, did she ask for more detail, did she bring it up often?”

“No.” She shook her head. “I only told her once, and I said afterward that I didn’t want to talk about it again.”

“And one last question, Miss Dillon,” Buechler said. “Do Julian Hollister, Paige Montgomery, Lucy Reed, or Zackary Thrasher know the details of your mother’s death? The pills, the bathtub. Could they have encouraged Emily to replicate it?”

“No. They don’t know the details. Any of them.” She forced the words out of her, hating how small they made her feel.

Harding clicked her pen closed, like a hammer against a stubborn nail.

Jodi stood on wobbly knees and grabbed her bag. Somehow she got down the hall, twisting around the check-in desk, and out into the sunlight. She started walking, unsure where the bus stop was.

*Because your mother died by suicide.*

She felt like a fool. How many times had she thought about her mother dying, how many times had she asked Rosa to tell her the story ... and it never occurred to her why the bathroom door was locked.

Jodi’s feet stopped. Her stomach roiled, and she swallowed back bile.

If her mother had wanted to die, then why was Jodi in the tub?

A text pulled her focus. It was from Julian.

**im parked on the corner if you want a ride. the gang is at chavez park**

She wiped her wet eyes. They wanted information. Of course they did. Thirty minutes ago, she would have wanted to give it to them. Now ...

She walked down a block until a black truck appeared on the street.

“How was it?” he asked as soon as she shut the door.

She hesitated by putting on her seat belt. “Fine. They still don’t know what you texted her.”

He stared at her for too long a moment without putting the truck in gear, so she prompted, “Cesar Chavez Park?”

“What did they say to you? Why do you look like that?”

“Let’s just go to the park,” she said. “So I don’t have to repeat myself.”

Cesar Chavez Park had one safe corner to it, next to the street vendors selling to the downtown commuters. That’s where they found the rest of them—including Kiera, Jodi was irritated to find out.

“Hey!” Zack said. “How did it go?”

Jodi tried to smile. “It was okay.” Her hands shook as she pushed her hair out of her face. Her eyes caught on Kiera, who had no business hearing what happened in her deposition. “There’s nothing really new to report.”

Lucy opened her mouth to ask more, but Julian cut her off. “Let’s get food. We can talk about it over burgers.”

Conversation seemed to pop in and out of her ears as they discussed where to go. She didn’t want to talk about the deposition. She didn’t want to tell them that Emily had died like her mom.

Jodi felt like she’d lost sensation in her legs as she walked with them toward the cars.

“Nuh-uh,” Lucy said, pausing them. “Let’s have a girls’ car.” She pushed Zack toward Julian’s truck, away from the front seat of Kiera’s Camry that he’d been moving to. Lucy gave Jodi a sly wink.

Jodi slid into the seat behind Lucy as Paige rambled about student council to her from the next seat. She watched Kiera triple-check her mirrors and say “Lucy had to parallel park for me” in a perky voice. It took her a handful of seconds to figure out she was talking to Jodi. “This is just my practice car. My dad is buying me a new one for my birthday.”

Jodi looked at the car. It was perfectly fine, even if it did have manual locks and manual windows. In a haze, she realized Kiera wanted to make sure they knew she was rich. She was “one of them.”

They took off, Julian’s truck just behind them in the rearview mirror as they headed for the J Street bridge. Jodi couldn’t concentrate on the conversation. All she could do was focus on keeping it together.

*You’ve been told that you were in the tub with her?*

If her mother had killed herself, Rosa would have said something. She ranted all the time about her dad. Something would have come up.

Jodi cataloged the insults over the years, coming up with a few moments of *Don’t really blame her for wanting out* or *Stupid choices, always stupid choices with that girl* or *Your mother was selfish. Wonderful, but selfish.*

The construction on the bridge over the river had finally ended—overnight, it seemed. The orange signs had been taken down and both lanes were finally open.

Jodi stared out the window to her right as Lucy turned up the Rihanna. Kiera sang along, shouting the words and making Paige laugh. Kiera with the brown hair, tiny waist, and trust fund. More of a Thrasher than Jodi would ever be.

*Why do you think you're friends?* Harding had said. *What do you think you add to the dynamic?*

Maybe she should let Kiera have them.

Jodi blinked slowly, a pricking between her eyes.

Maybe she was always meant to be Thrashed in the end. She was the final project. The long game.

"Are you okay, babe?" Kiera's eyes were on her in the rearview mirror. Green. Beautiful. Already calling her *babe*, like Paige.

Jodi nodded and took a deep breath, ready to shake it off. Her gaze landed on the streetlamps along the bridge. They were already flickering to life, even though it was hours from sunset.

Kiera gasped.

The car swerved left into oncoming traffic. Paige screamed as Kiera overcorrected.

Jodi's hands shot out, bracing herself on the back of Lucy's seat and the window as the crunch of steel ground through her bones.

The car was in motion in the air, and the sound of four girls shrieking pounded through her eardrums all the way down. She saw the sky through the window, and then the car hit the water.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Water lapped at their windows. Jodi sat facing forward, feeling the seat belt dig into her collar and breathing hard.

They were in the river.

They were going to drown. Emily would win.

“Shut the fuck up!” Lucy yelled, and only then did Jodi realize Paige was still screaming.

She blinked away her fear and saw Lucy pressing her airbag away from her.

“We have to—to get out!” Paige shrieked. “We have to open the doors —”

“Don’t!” Lucy twisted, reaching out for Paige’s knee as she grabbed the door handle. “Wait. We have to ... we have to do it together.”

Jodi’s voice was hollow to her ears when she said, “The water can slosh you around, move you away from the doors. We should wear our seatbelts.”

It was only then that she looked up and found Lucy pressing her fingers to Kiera’s neck, holding her palm under her nose. She was slumped forward in the driver’s seat, head pressed against the steering wheel and blood sliding down the curve of it onto her knees. Lucy shook her softly. She didn’t move.

“Is she dead? Is she fucking dead?” Paige said, breath thin.

“She’s breathing,” Lucy said, but she didn’t sound confident.

Jodi looked out her window. A line like the horizon split the view from water to sky.

“We have to wait,” Lucy whispered. “We have to submerge.”

Jodi didn't think that was right.

"We can't wait! We have to get out! We can't just sit here!"

"Paige, this river isn't deep. It's fine. We just—we just need to wait for the car to go under—"

"What the fuck are you talking about! I can't wait! I can't sit here! Right, Jodi?"

Paige turned wild eyes on Jodi, and she saw the red blot of blood on Paige's window and the blood staining her blond hair pink.

Jodi turned forward to Lucy and saw her eyes catch on it.

"Paige, it's going to be okay," Lucy said. "I'm going to take care of you. I always take care of you."

Paige seemed to breathe.

The sky was getting darker. Jodi watched the sun disappear in the water. Water.

Drowning.

The water lapped against the top of the window, and then there was only bubbles.

"Okay, listen to me. Make sure your seatbelts aren't locked." Lucy unbuckled and then re-buckled. Paige did it three times. "Do you see my bag back there, Jodi?"

Jodi looked on the floor. Phones, wallets, receipts, lip gloss. She couldn't even pick out which were hers.

"I need my bag," Lucy repeated.

"You don't need it. We have to get out. We need to just get out—"

"I need my inhaler unless either of you are going to haul her body." Lucy's voice broke on the last word, and Jodi listened to it crack like dirt in the desert.

Paige reached down and scrambled through the stuff on the floor. Her aim was odd, reaching for things twice, fingers not grabbing zippers until the third try. She was concussed.

Jodi stared at the back of Lucy's seat, ignoring the gray water to her right. One of them couldn't breathe, one of them couldn't think, and one of them couldn't swim.

The sound of the inhaler puff broke into Jodi's thoughts. As Lucy held the Albuterol in her lungs, she reached over and made sure Kiera's seat belt

wasn't jammed. She exhaled and said, "Okay, we roll down the windows. Take a deep breath at the last moment, and then unbuckle and swim up."

Jodi stared at the blood on Kiera's knee. Lucy had said *body*.

"Jodi!"

She snapped her eyes to Lucy's, intent on hers.

"Roll it all the way down. Don't stop. Then just kick. Head for the sun, okay?"

Jodi stared at her. Paige was hyperventilating again, but Lucy was watching her like she'd just remembered why Jodi never got in the pool.

Nodding her head, Jodi grabbed the manual window handle. She wondered if Kiera had been awake, or if Paige had been in control of herself, if maybe Jodi could have asked to be carried out instead. If maybe Lucy would have crawled into the back seat and helped her through the window first.

But maybe not. Maybe that was too much to ask.

"One, two, three!"

Paige screamed. Jodi pushed her handle down and the barely open crack burst with water like a dam. Her air rushed out of her as water smacked her in the face, soaking the back seat. She couldn't breathe in.

Weakly, she turned her window down a full rotation. The water was splashing in at their waists. A cell phone floated up.

And within seconds it was at her neck, like a heavy collar, pressing in. Jodi was choking, sputtering.

The last thing she saw before her eyes shut tight was Lucy's fingers holding Kiera's head up above water. Jodi breathed deep.

A hollow echo of the world was in her ears. She felt her arms floating. Her lips pressed closed tightly, barricading her last breath of air inside of her.

Her eyes opened to a fuzzy gray world so like her own. The back of Lucy's seat. Two bodies flailing near the passenger side.

Jodi turned to find her seat belt, and blinding pain lanced through her jaw. Bubbles escaped her lips as she blinked, finding Paige's shoes inches from her face as she kicked her way out the window.

She'd kicked her. Jodi had lost air. She'd lost time.

Lucy had gotten out, reaching back inside for Kiera's arm.

She watched as the body was dragged out, like a doll slipping through dirt and grass as it trailed behind a child.

And then she was alone.

Jodi looked left and right. Her window was only halfway down. She pushed against the handle, rotating it lower and lower.

*I can't die. I can't drown like my mother.*

The thoughts came furious into her mind as her arm moved against the water to open the window.

*It must have been very traumatic ... You've been told that you were in the tub with her?*

But maybe that's what she'd wanted. If the cops were right ... If her mother wanted to kill herself that day ...

Why was Jodi in the tub?

She watched her hair float forward around her face.

Maybe she wasn't meant to survive this. She couldn't swim. Maybe she should have died sixteen years ago, and now death had come to collect.

It was quiet underwater. Her head was getting fuzzy. She'd need to breathe soon, but there was nothing to do.

She tried turning to the open window, but her body was heavy, pulled back to the seat.

Like an arm on her shoulder, pushing her down.

Jodi turned to the left.

Her eyes were blurry and her head spun, but there was something there. A person sitting there. Blond hair and blue eyes and wide teeth smiling at her.

Emily reached out her hand. Jodi stared at the fingertips, painted orange.

Maybe there was a place she belonged. And maybe she didn't have to fight to get there.

She reached for Emily's hand, laced their fingers together, and closed her eyes.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Light burst against her pupils. She coughed, sucking in air. Blessed air.

She heard sound like she was inside a bottle, listening to it ricochet over her. Blinking against the orange light against her eyes, the first thing she felt was pain in her chest.

“Oh, you fucking bitch.”

Jodi wheezed, blinking.

Julian Hollister’s wet hair dripped onto her face. He looked like he wanted to kill her.

*I’m already dead.*

He disappeared in a tantrum of curse words as wet blond hair slapped against her cheeks.

“Julian, don’t! God!” Paige brushed her fingers over Jodi’s cheeks. “Jodi, babe. Breathe.”

“Did everyone get out?” an unfamiliar man shouted from far away.

“Yes!” Paige replied. “Four of us.”

“Is she breathing?” the man said.

Jodi stared into the setting sun. Orange and pink and fuchsia. Yes, she supposed she was breathing.

But Paige didn’t answer.

Jodi turned her head to the right where she heard a soft counting, punctuated by thumps. She stared through wet eyelashes as Zack pumped Kiera’s chest, leaning down to blow into her mouth.

Kiera coughed.

Paige left her side. Jodi turned her head toward the pink clouds, lying alone on the rocky shore of the river.

“Julian!” Lucy called for him, as if he was far away from them.

Jodi listened to Kiera breathe, feeling her own chest ache and wheeze.

“Where is she?” Kiera’s rasping voice asked.

Jodi tilted her head back to the right. Kiera was sitting up, looking at the water. Her eyes wild.

Sirens wailed, bleep blipping.

“Jodi’s right over here,” Paige said.

“Where’s Emily?” Kiera gasped. “I hit her. I hit her with my car. She was in the middle of the road and I hit her.”

Jodi heard the crunch of boots on gravel and turned to see first responders arriving, carrying gurneys down the side of the river bank.

“Where’s Emily?” she repeated.

The pain in Jodi’s chest was too tight. As the boots reached her, she closed her eyes, happy to pass out again instead of listening to the answer.

★ ★ ★

Jodi woke up to the familiar popcorn ceiling of Mercy Hospital. A monitor beeped to her left, and nurses chatted just past the curtains.

She tried to sit up, and pain lanced through her chest. Wincing, she shifted against the pillows to get upright.

“Hey, hey. Easy, tiger.” Lucy appeared at her side, guiding her. “Your rib broke during CPR.”

Jodi squeezed her eyes shut. “Now the pleasant wildfire in my chest makes sense.”

“The doctor should tell you, but there’s no cast or anything. It hurts like a bitch and heals on its own in four to six weeks.”

She nodded. “Did they see Paige’s head? She has a concussion—”

“Yeah, they got her. She’s down the hall. Our third concussion this year, collectively.”

“We should go for a record.” Jodi checked the time on the monitor. 8:12. “Where’s Zack?”

“He’s ... checking on Kiera.”

Jodi knew she should have been curious about her condition, but all she felt was a hot spike of anger and jealousy coursing through her. Two girls almost drowned today, and he made a choice as to whose bedside to wait at.

"Julian's nowhere to be found," Lucy said. "As soon as the ambulance took off, he got in his truck and drove away."

Jodi scoffed, and her chest constricted in response. "Figures."

"Is there anything going on with you two?"

Jodi swiveled her head to see Lucy studying her, a coy smile on her lips.

"Who two?"

"You two. You and Julian."

She blinked at her. "Sorry, what's the question?"

Lucy smiled slowly. "He was very worried about you."

"Yeah, he called me a 'fucking bitch' when I woke up."

Sitting back in her chair, Lucy took a breath and crossed her legs. "He met me in the river. I was treading water, trying to keep Kiera's head above the surface and swim for the shore, and he said, 'Where's Jodi?'"

A shiver crested over her shoulders. She tried to look away from Lucy's deep eyes but couldn't.

"I tried to give him Kiera, but he just swam down for you. Wouldn't let anyone else pump your chest on the river bank."

"He knew I couldn't swim," she said quickly. "That's probably why."

Lucy nodded slowly, barely accepting the excuse. "Well, I'm gonna try to find him. Let him know he broke your rib, but that you're completely alright."

"Yeah, okay. I mean, if you want to." Eager to change the subject, she asked, "My dad?"

"They called him. Zack made sure they called Rosa, too."

"She's gonna force me to live here sooner or later."

"Yeah, we really need to cut it with the whole traumatic injury thing."

Jodi hesitated. "Tell that to Emily."

Lucy's eyes snapped up to her.

"Did you see anybody in the road?" Jodi asked.

"No. Nothing. Suddenly, she was just braking and swerving. But there was nobody there."

The curtain pulled back and revealed Zack. "Hey, Jo." He grimaced.

Lucy stood. "I'm gonna check on Paige."

“Okay, yeah.” Zack hooked his thumb in the direction of the hall. “They just told me she’ll be good to go soon.”

Jodi looked down at her starchy white sheets. Three girls in the hospital, and Jodi was the last person on the list.

Lucy let the curtain close behind her, and Zack took her chair. “You okay?”

“Dandy. And Kiera?” She was proud of herself for controlling her voice.

He ran a hand through his hair. “She’s physically fine. But she’s ... she’s really freaked out about thinking she saw Emily on that bridge.”

Jodi nodded, scrunching the sheets between her fingers.

Zack sat with her while the doctor checked in and discussed discharging her. When they were gone, he pulled out his phone.

“I’ll text Julian, let him know you’re alright.”

Jodi’s eye twitched. “Yeah, okay.”

Zack shook his head as his thumbs moved. “I’ve never seen anyone move that fast. He had to stop the truck, put it in park, and he still made it down to the riverbank before I did. I’m glad you two are finally getting along.”

“Who said we’re getting along?” There was an edge to her voice she didn’t like. “He probably just went into lifeguard mode.”

Zack dropped it with a shrug.

Jodi felt irritation swirling in her chest, bubbling next to her broken rib. She blamed the painkillers for opening her mouth.

“Why was Kiera even there today, Zack?”

He glanced up at her with unguarded, curious eyes. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, why did you invite her to hang out while I was in my deposition?” She leveled a hard stare at him. “Why did she have to be a part of that today? Did you really think I’d sit down at dinner and tell all of you what happened at the courthouse while Kiera was sitting there?”

Zack’s gaze flickered over her. He seemed to struggle for words, opening and closing his mouth. “I don’t ... I guess I don’t see what the problem is?”

Jodi’s brows jumped to her hairline. “You don’t?”

“No?” He rubbed the back of his neck. “She’s cool, Jodi. Like, she’s not going to tell anyone anything we talk about.”

“For how long?”

“What?”

“For how long will she keep all our secrets, Zack?” Jodi’s voice was hard-edged. “As long as you’re flirting with her? As long as she gets to hang out with the Thrashers? At least until prom, I’m sure, as long as you’re taking her.” She felt her face heat. Zack frowned at her. “What do you think happens when you’re done with her? Does she still keep these confidential, *legal* secrets then?”

Zack sat back in his chair, his mouth pressed in a thin line. “You’re starting to sound like the rest of them. Julian, and Lucy, and Paige. You used to be the only one who didn’t think the worst of people.”

“Oh, I always thought it. I just was too afraid to tell you the truth,” Jodi said. She felt the words pouring out of her like water. “Too afraid I’d get Thrashed if I said something you didn’t like.”

He stared at her, confusion and mild disgust warring on his face. Sighing in the back of his throat, he lifted his hands to rub his eyes. “What are you even talking about? Why would you use that word?”

“Because you do call the shots, Zack,” she said. Her heart was in her throat. “You wanted Julian to come on *our* Six Flags trip in eighth grade, so he did. You wanted Paige and Lucy to start doing everything with us, so now they do. I didn’t ask for any of these people to be my closest friends, but now I have them. I don’t have anything in common with them except that we all want to be around you.”

“And so, what?” he said sharply. “You all get jealous when I try to introduce someone new? Is that it?” He sat forward, his eyes pleading with her almost. “I don’t decide when someone gets Thrashed. That’s all of you. You’re the ones telling me when someone is no good or when they annoy you or when you don’t want them at your parties.”

Jodi shook her head in frustration, looking away from him. “Okay. Fine, if you think that’s the truth. Just please *stop* treating Kiera like someone who will be here for the long haul. You have no idea if she will be. And you’re an idiot if you think we can talk about the cases with someone you’ve known for five minutes.”

Jodi felt heat in her cheeks and lips, hot anger and embarrassment rising.

Zack took a deep breath and sounded resigned when he said, “Yeah. Okay. I don’t think it will be a problem. She said she didn’t really want to spend time with us anymore after what happened today. And after the rose garden.”

Pressing her lips together, Jodi bit out, “Well, I’m sorry to hear that.”

A puff of air burst from Zack’s mouth, and she looked over to see him laughing. “No, you’re not.”

She smiled. “No, I’m not.” He laughed again. “Zack, she had no discernible personality. I mean, what the hell?”

“Yes, she did!”

“‘Rich, pretty, and obsessed with you’ is not a personality,” Jodi said, laughing, too.

“Are you kidding? It’s my favorite type of person,” Zack joked, and Jodi hit him with her limp hospital pillow.

★ ★ ★

The thing about driving your car off a bridge is that you’re grateful to be alive, but everything else is one hundred times more difficult.

Jodi’s phone was gone. It was at the bottom of the American River, along with her wallet. They would send a team to get the car out, but the first priority wasn’t recovering possessions.

Her broken rib hurt like a mother. Rosa kept her home from school for the first week of recovery, and as much as Jodi begged, she wouldn’t let her drop by the theater lab to check on the backdrop. The theater lab was the one place she felt like she had some control over anything in her life. She *created* things there, and it was torture to stay in bed while Oliver kept the scenic lab freshmen away from her unfinished backdrop.

It was a week of schoolwork, puzzles with Grandma, and phone calls to replace everything she’d lost in the car. She kept in touch with Oliver about the play, and her friends checked on her—all of them except Julian. She’d heard nothing from him since he’d dragged her onto the river bank.

On Wednesday, Jodi gingerly lowered herself to sit at the card table with Grandma. She was piecing together a puzzle of a vase filled with brightly colored flowers. She had been wanting to ask Grandma about her mother ever since the deposition, to see if Buechler and Harding were right. But there was never a good time to ask someone if their daughter killed themselves. But today, Grandma brought her up.

“Your mother broke her leg in sixth grade,” she said. “She didn’t whine as much as you.”

Jodi laughed, and stopped when her rib ached. “How did she break it?”

“She was trying to show off for the older kids. Herminia always tried to be older than she was.”

Her fingers paused in their reach for an edge piece. “Who?” Jodi asked.

“Herminia Josephina Rodriguez,” Grandma said. “She hated it, so she asked to be called Josephine.”

“My mother’s first name was Herminia?”

Grandma nodded. Jodi stared at the puzzle pieces.

Nan had been right. The *H* name. It had been her mother trying to be heard over Emily.

*She wants you to go to Rosa’s.*

Swallowing back the lump in her throat, Jodi asked, “Was my mother sad? Was she depressed?”

Grandma pushed a purple flower into place and took a deep breath. “Sadness comes and goes. Herminia had more of it than others.”

Jodi’s eyes brimmed with tears. She wanted to ask more—if her mother had taken those pills on purpose, if she’d locked the door on purpose, if she’d brought Jodi into the tub, *knowing* what would happen. But Grandma excused herself to make tea.

Jodi finished the edge pieces for her instead.

★ ★ ★

The following week, Jodi came home from her first day back at school, immediately grabbed more painkillers for her ribs, and sat down to open her college portal. The halls had been drowning in news of college acceptance

letters that day, and Jodi could barely concentrate through the end of her classes, anxious to get to a computer since she didn't have a phone still.

Jodi took a deep breath and typed in her password.

*California Institute of the Arts is pleased to accept you into our Theatrical Design and Production program.*

Bright joy filled her chest. Jodi beamed at the screen. She was going to CalArts.

She ran to the living room and found Rosa and Grandma watching TV, and without preamble, she burst out, "I got into CalArts!"

Rosa screamed and threw her popcorn in the air.

Jodi clapped her hand over her smile and couldn't help the giddy laughter that poured out of her, despite the pain in her ribs. Grandma danced and kissed her cheek, and Rosa started crying.

"I know I still have to hear about financial aid." Jodi wiped away the tears that had started to fall.

Rosa hushed her. "Don't worry about that now. We will figure it out, I promise you."

Grandma got on the phone and started telling all of her friends, and Rosa started making a cake to celebrate. Jodi thought about calling her dad, but wondered if he might immediately think about money instead of letting her live in this moment.

She decided to wait. As she went to her laptop to type in the group chat, she realized that the rest of her friends were having their college dreams shattered. Maybe she could wait a little longer to tell them, too. Maybe after the trials.

Rosa took Jodi to get a new phone the next day. Once she'd transferred her apps and contacts and made sure she still had access to her pictures, she checked in with Paige about her concussion and asked about Kiera.

**does she still think she saw emily on the bridge?**

Paige typed back, she told the doctors and police that she hadn't been sleeping and thought she saw someone but she said maybe she didn't. Zack tried to reach out to her but she said she wanted space.

Jodi frowned. She didn't think Kiera would drive them off a bridge on purpose, but she wondered if exhaustion was really to blame.

With her phone finally in her hand, she was anxious to check on everyone. She hovered over Julian's number, wondering what to say.

Maybe thank you? If he hadn't been so quick to get to her, it might have been too late.

The day before, he'd greeted her with a nod from across the room, but didn't follow her to her locker or ask for notes like he used to. So he wasn't ignoring her. They just weren't friends. Again. It was strange how used to him she'd gotten.

Jodi typed generic greetings and deleted them. She typed long-winded paragraphs thanking him for coming for her and deleted them. She took a deep breath and ran her hand through her hair, tugging on the roots. Her chest was tight, and it had nothing to do with the pain in her ribs. There was nothing to say that felt right.

What do you say to someone who swam to the bottom of a river for you *and* did CPR?

She thought maybe she should just pull him aside at school, but the idea of it twisted her stomach in knots. She couldn't imagine looking into his smug hazel eyes and saying thanks, like he'd offered her gum.

Ultimately, she decided to wait until the moment felt right.

When she got home from school the next day, she had an email waiting for her from Greg Thrasher. The subject line just said **You were right ...**

When she opened it, there was an attachment called "Vanessa Jones." She opened it quickly and found paperwork with the Sac High logos on it, but blacked-out names and addresses.

April 2, 2023

After speaking with [REDACTED] in extensive detail, it is my recommendation to separate [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] for future classes and extracurricular programs. [REDACTED] has been bothering [REDACTED] and repeatedly inserting herself into [REDACTED]'s personal life, including showing up unannounced to her house, using [REDACTED]'s passcode to open her phone and snoop around, and stalking friends of [REDACTED] if she brings them up in conversation.

[REDACTED] no longer wishes to associate with [REDACTED] and would like any action by the school to be discreet at this time.

Jodi scrolled to the next document, her mind spinning quickly to fill in the redacted names.

May 18, 2023

The parents of [REDACTED] are considering filing a restraining order against [REDACTED]. The behavior has not improved and [REDACTED] has made her boundaries clear. I suggest a meeting with Principal Hughes and the [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] families to resolve and/or to consider disciplinary action.

Jodi read it over ten times, her heart pounding as she put herself in Vanessa's shoes.

Vanessa had wanted a restraining order against Emily. She obviously hadn't filed it, or else the defense would already know about it. But it was bad enough that Emily had to switch schools.

Staring at her ceiling that night, Jodi wondered if Emily would have gotten that bad with her eventually. She thought about the photo she'd edited together of the two of them.

Maybe it was already that bad.

**Case No. 4512420**

Excerpt from the journal of Emily Mills

Entered into evidence 6.08.2024 by Det. Chelsea Harding

*May 10, 2024*

***TOMORROW NIGHT IS PROM! I CAN'T EVEN BELIEVE I'M EVEN GOING. THERE AREN'T A LOT OF SOPHOMORES GOING TO JUNIOR/SENIOR PROM.***

***LUCY HASN'T SAID ANYTHING ABOUT THE SODA BOTTLE THING. SHE'S ACTING NORMAL—WHICH MEANS SHE'S IGNORING ME.***

***I CASUALLY MENTIONED THAT I'VE NEVER SLOW-DANCED BEFORE, AND ZACK SAID HE'D DANCE WITH ME. I ALMOST FAINTED. I KNEW IT. I KNEW WE WERE GOING TO BE TOGETHER. HE TOLD ME NOT TO SAY ANYTHING ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED OVER SPRING BREAK, BUT I THINK HE'S READY TO TELL HIS FRIENDS. WE'RE BASICALLY GOING TO PROM TOGETHER, SO IT'LL BE OFFICIAL SOON.***

***PEOPLE HAVE SEX ON PROM NIGHT ALL THE TIME, SO I'M GOING TO TELL ZACK I WANT IT TO HAPPEN AGAIN. AND AGAIN AND AGAIN AND AGAIN AND AGAIN ...***

# Chapter Twenty-Five

MAY

There was a somber cloud over New Helvetia High as prom inched closer. Paige was surprisingly the first one to suggest not going.

Jodi sat silently through weeks of waffling over group texts as they talked through the pros and cons of just riding around in a limo or staying in at Zack's to watch a movie. Jodi didn't care. High school was ending. The trial dates were looming, and nothing was right.

Going to prom wouldn't be "going to prom," no matter what they did. She focused on finishing the backdrop for *West Side Story*, which would open the weekend after prom.

Surprisingly, it was Julian who burst into the group chat a week before the dance and said, **fuck it guys. let's do this**, with a mirror selfie of him trying on his tux.

The picture appeared as Jodi was in the kitchen waiting for water to boil. She felt her skin itch in irritation at how good Julian Hollister looked in formal wear. His bowtie was undone, loose around his neck, and he had one hand in his pants pocket, leaning back on his leg. She scoffed to herself, shaking her head at how unfair it was to all of humanity that Julian Hollister knew how to wear his clothes.

Her eyes were tracing the long lines of his legs when a splashing sound caught her attention, and she realized she'd been staring at the picture long enough for the water to boil over. Jodi turned down the burner, swallowing down her mortification.

**Not fair,** Jodi texted back. **You have 10 tuxes in your closet im sure. the girls have to scramble now.**

Lucy was quick to agree with him that they should go, and she told Jodi she could wear last year's dress no problem.

Jodi frowned down at her phone as Paige and Zack got dragged into agreement, then ran downstairs to tell Rosa the good news. Her aunt had been sending her links to dresses for the past month.

They'd decided against a limo this time. Greg Thrasher allowed Zack to go to his senior prom, but only if he didn't draw attention to himself. Which Jodi found to be a hilarious caveat because Zack drew attention to himself wherever he went.

Cheryl Montgomery swung by Rosa's in her Land Rover at eight, and Jodi squeezed into the third row behind Zack and Lucy. They went to pick up Julian next—his tux perfectly pressed and shoes shined. When he dropped into the seat next to her, she felt that pull again—that need to say thank you that bubbled so close to the surface. He barely glanced at her before buckling his seat belt and asking Zack about a new video game release that had been announced. Jodi stared forward, feeling immensely idiotic for holding out hope that they could go back to what they had before the car drove off the bridge. That wasn't even their "normal," so there was no reason to think it would continue.

When Paige stepped out of the passenger door onto the school's red carpet, she looked like a fairy princess in white and gold. Lucy was in a faux tuxedo with a plunging neckline that almost got her stopped at the door.

Jodi was climbing out of the SUV, trying to navigate her heels, when she realized they were all ahead of her. The four of them were already on the red carpet, already moving to the doors, already the perfect team. They drew attention to themselves no matter what. The Thrashers.

"Have fun, Jodi!" Cheryl broke her concentration. "If they get too drunk, call me. You have my number."

Jodi grimaced and thanked her, shutting the car door. She trotted behind her friends in uncomfortable heels, watching them ahead as if through a frosted window. Her on the outside, in the cold.

Inside the dance, Jodi stood at Paige's elbow, feeling like she was just a step behind in every conversation.

"Pictures?" Paige asked the group.

“Just not the five of us. We can split a bit,” Zack said softly, and Lucy nodded.

But once they were at the photographer, Lucy and Paige asked for a couple’s photo, then Paige wanted a picture with Zack, and then Lucy grabbed Julian for a funny pose. Jodi had that sensation of being underwater again, trying to fight for the surface. No one wanted a picture with her. It wasn’t that they didn’t *want* one, it’s that they didn’t think of it. She was an afterthought. She wondered how long she’d been an afterthought.

Her face burned as her eyes stung, and she felt mortified to be standing at prom on the verge of tears. Her throat felt choked with all the pent-up loneliness she’d carried since finding out how her mom died—since she was subpoenaed against her friends—since the first time, years ago, that she waited all night for Zack to text her back, only to hear, *sorry i was with julian*.

Zack turned to her, and she looked away so he wouldn’t see her burning eyes. “Jo. Picture?”

She shook her head with a thin smile. “I’m good.”

Her breath shook as she tried to remind herself that he *did* think of her, even if it was an afterthought.

Jodi felt completely out of control by the time Paige suggested that they better vote for prom king and queen.

“I’m going to the bathroom real quick,” she said, and though Lucy acknowledged her and Paige told her where they’d be, no one seemed to notice how the first tear had escaped her eyelashes before she could turn toward the doors.

Jodi pushed through the crowd into the hallway and leaned on a set of lockers to steady her breathing.

She felt so foolish. What would she even say if anyone asked why she was crying? *My friends’ lives don’t revolve around me? I got sad, and getting sad got me sadder?*

She listened to the music change, a clear sign that the dancing was starting, and once her chest felt empty again, she headed toward the theater wing.

Oliver had made her a copy of the key to the theater’s scenic lab a few months ago so she could lock up if she stayed late working on the backdrop. The play was in six days, and Jodi could think of nothing else she felt like

doing except putting a workshop apron on over her gown, kicking off her heels, and prying open the paint cans. She would probably get paint on her dress, but she wondered if anyone would even notice.

She unlocked the door, reminding herself to relock it on her way out, and kicked off her shoes. Jodi looked over the city landscape she was almost done with, just highlights and darkened windows still needed. She could take a half hour to pop the cans, make some progress, and clean out the brushes before wandering back to the dance floor. A childish part of her wanted to never go back—to see if they would leave the dance without her, if her phone ever buzzed.

She was just mixing the grays together when the heavy door pushed open, cracking harshly in the silence. Over her shoulder, she watched Julian take in her painter's apron, her mixing trays, her heels discarded on the concrete floor.

She expected, *What are you doing?* Or, *Is everything okay?* But when he just moved into the lab and let the door close quietly behind him, she realized that was what Zack would say. Zack would punch through a problem head-on. As he skirted around the far lab bench, she realized that when faced with a problem, Julian either ignored it or cozied up to it. He leaned forward on the clean workbench, elbows braced in front of him, and stared at the backdrop. She wondered which he was choosing today.

"What's the plot of this one? More dead lovers?"

"Yeah, actually. *West Side Story* is *Romeo and Juliet*, but set in New York in the fifties."

"And they sing?"

"They sing."

He was silent for a minute, staring at the painting. "So, this is New York. In the fifties."

"It is." She stirred the gray, adding white until it was a few shades lighter than what was on the muslin.

"Can I help?"

She blinked down at the paint, considering if it would be worth it to redo all of his lines later. "If you want. You can leave me here though. I don't know if you've heard, but there's a dance going on in the gym."

"A *dance*. How grand." He grabbed a paintbrush—the wrong paintbrush—and approached her. "So what are we doing?"

There was a twist to his voice, like he knew he'd asked a loaded question. But Jodi ignored it, replaced the brush in his hand with the correct one, and showed him how she was highlighting the dark windows. She pointed to where the aprons were, but he just stepped up to the tall windows and began.

Jodi usually painted with music on. Without it, she could hear the scratch of the brushes like wood being sanded down. In the silence, the lab had the atmosphere of a confessional.

"I think my mom killed herself." She whispered it to the Manhattan skyline.

To his credit, Julian didn't pause or react. He bent at the waist to dip his paintbrush, wiping off the excess like she'd shown him, and then straightened and continued.

She thought maybe she could get away with just saying it. She'd spoken out loud. Maybe that's all that needed to happen.

"When I got to the car, your window was only half-down and your seat belt was still on."

She could tell him about Paige's shoe to her face, or remind him about her inability to swim, but she just swiped a new line at a new window.

"Did you give up when the car flooded," he whispered, "or before it even left the bridge?"

Jodi finished a window. "Dad never let me near a pool because my mom drowned in our bathtub after taking too many painkillers." And after a pause, "I was in the tub with her. I think she wanted me to die, too."

Her throat felt choked again, that same sensation from earlier. There was nothing else she could say without cracking into a million pieces.

It was too quiet. The silence forced her to face him. There wasn't pity in his gaze or a rush to say the right words. He just looked at her and saw her.

"Maybe she did. But I don't want you to," he said. Like it was as simple as that.

She held his gaze, waiting for the right response to come to her. Quick as a flash, he reached up and ran his paintbrush over her exposed clavicles with a naughty smile.

Jodi's mouth fell open, eyes wide. He bit his lip and lifted a brow.

She stepped up to him, waiting for him to make a run for it, examining his black tux. She swept the brush through the hair at his temple, turning it

gray. When he didn't stop her, she did the other temple as well.

He cleared his throat with a smile, bent down to freshen up his brush—so she thought—and pressed his hand into the paint tray. He stood tall and planted his gray hand in the middle of her chest over her sternum, leaving a handprint over the apron.

She gasped and drew her brush down his chest before she could think. Down his tux.

“Oh god. That was dumb. I'm so sorry—”

His paintbrush pushed into her ear and she squealed. He wrapped her into a bear hug, untied her apron, and dipped his fingers into the paint can on the table. She could barely laugh out “No!” before he clawed at the front of her dress to match his slash of gray.

His raspy laughter in her ear warmed her stomach, and she shrieked when he pushed his temple against her cheek to smear the paint onto her skin. She pushed back, reaching her brush for the paint can, but he caught her wrist, tugged her waist close to him, and swallowed her laughter with his lips against hers.

Jodi's chest shook, like an aftershock following a quake. She gasped in air, and Julian's tongue brushed across hers. The paintbrush clattered to the concrete floor.

His hand stained with gray paint pressed to her jaw and the back of her neck, enveloping her, and his mouth moved over hers in the way that people who knew how to kiss moved their mouths—teasing, testing, trying.

Her fingers curled in his tux jacket, and freshman year welled up in her mind—Zack's birthday party and spin the bottle. Julian's mouth brushing over hers for half a second before he was wiping his hand across his curled lips—

She pushed at his shoulder and the moment their lips parted she rushed out, “I'm sorry.”

Because clearly, *she* did this, right? Julian Hollister didn't want to kiss her. Somehow he'd pressed his cheek to hers and she'd moved their mouths and he'd fallen forward, closer—

“For what?” His eyes searched hers. His hand was still cupped around her jaw, fingers on her neck. Holding her. Dragging her nearer to him.

His breath crested over her forehead, and she thought of him coming to see *Our Town*, and how he'd come after her tonight when no one else

bothered. How she would have let herself drown if he hadn't outright refused.

She flung her arms around his neck—maybe like they did in the movies, maybe like an awkward baby bird—and shoved him back against the wall. He laughed as their mouths connected again, but hissed and looked down. He'd stepped in the paint tray, his dress shoe's sole soaked.

"Oh god," she said, pressing her eyes closed.

His hands curled over her cheeks, pulling her face back to his. He kissed her in a way that wasn't soft, but wasn't aggressive, only stopping to tug the apron neck over her head and toss it to the side. He backed her into the worktable, his height looming over her as her eyes fluttered closed. His hand dragged down over her painted collarbones, resting between her breasts—where he'd pounded her ribs to get river water out of her lungs.

And she wondered what it was they were doing, and if it was wise to let him crack her chest open a second time, just to see if he fit inside.

Her mouth felt drunk and needy against his, and she knew she couldn't be as good at this as he was used to, but she didn't care. Not when he was slanting his lips to nip at her, taste her—making her head spin while she tried to keep up.

"What the hell is this?"

They broke apart at the voice, and Jodi whipped her neck around to see Zack in the doorway. His eyes were wide, but narrowing.

"Hi!" Jodi said, her voice too high. "We ... we were..."

She looked at Julian. His lips were red from kissing, but his expression was resigned.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Zack yelled, moving into the room.

Julian still wasn't responding, so Jodi babbled, "It's nothing! It just happened. We were fooling around, and—and he was helping me with painting—"

"In the middle of prom," Zack said, disbelief coloring his voice.

"Yeah." Jodi glanced at Julian as he leaned back on the worktable. He was staring at Zack in a way she'd never seen before. Like Zack was canceling his summer plans. Jodi continued, "It's not a big deal."

"How long has this been going on behind my back?" Zack snarled.

"Literally three and a half minutes." She laughed lightly, and no one joined her.

Zack stepped closer to Jodi and pointed at Julian. “He’s using you! You don’t see that?!”

Jodi blinked at him, feeling Julian stiffen next to her.

“He wants to be on your good side before it’s your turn to testify,” Zack hissed.

Julian stepped forward, his eyes hard. “That’s not it at all—”

“Jodi, *think!* He was *never* this friendly to you before you were subpoenaed.”

Flashes of moments stacked onto a timeline in her head as her mouth opened and closed. Showing up for her when she was drunk out of her mind. Leaning on her locker, walking with her between classes—all beginning spring semester. And coming to *Our Town*—

Her eyes pricked, and she shook her head as it filled with too many thoughts. “I don’t—”

“He’s distracting you because you’re lonely.” Zack’s eyes were dark and vicious on Julian, and Jodi felt a weight drop in her stomach. “He seized the opportunity—”

“I’d watch what you say about seizing opportunities,” Julian said softly, a threat in his tone.

Zack paled before snapping, “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Don’t push me.”

“Okay!” Jodi stepped forward, holding her hand up like she could physically separate them. “We’re all just ... running a little hot here. Julian and I”—she glanced at him—“were just messing around. It was nothing.”

Something flashed over his features in a ripple, like she’d said the exact words to break a curse. His eyes darkened and then zeroed in on Zack. In an even, casual voice, he asked, “Why do you care?”

“What?”

“Just two friends fooling around for a bit.” Julian shrugged. “No need to get upset.”

In that moment, she knew what she wanted Zack to say—how badly she wanted to hear that he was jealous or cared for her more than he’d ever realized. Julian set it up perfectly just to disappoint her.

“Of course I *care*.” Zack stepped forward. “You’ve never liked her, but now you want me to believe you’re into her?”

“And what if this was me and Paige,” Julian said, standing from the table smoothly. “Would it be such a big deal to you if Paige and I wanted to hook up?”

Jodi flinched. The thought of a simple swap of her for Paige seemed reductive, like his preference was random.

“You *know* it’s different—”

“How?” Julian said. “Both of them are your friends. Both of them are single.”

Zack seemed to crackle with tension as Julian remained still as stone.

“Paige has been hooking up with idiots for years,” Zack said. “She knows how to keep things casual.”

Jodi scoffed. “Okay. And I wouldn’t keep things casual?”

“Jo,” Zack said, exasperated. He touched her arm. “You know you’re not like that.”

Jodi looked into his eyes defiantly. She opened her mouth to argue.

Julian cut her off, his voice a sly shark under a tranquil surface. “But Emily was?”

Jodi blinked. There was a ringing in her ears as she watched Zack’s neck turn red. She stumbled back at the look of fear on his face.

“Don’t,” Zack said quietly. Begging.

Jodi looked between them, trying to follow. Trying to make sense of Emily being involved. Because if what Julian was implying was right, then Zack and Emily ...

Her chest tightened, and bile crept up the back of her throat. Her skin felt like it didn’t belong to her.

Zack looked down at her, lips open, ready to explain.

Her voice cracked as she said, “Did you sleep with Emily?”

“No! He’s manipulating you again.” Zack grabbed her arms and leaned down to meet her eyes. “I didn’t have sex with her.”

Jodi’s eyes slid to Julian, leaning against the workbench, his tux brushed with gray paint and his face solemn. She didn’t know when she’d started trusting him. Maybe she was being manipulated, but there was something wild in Zack’s eyes, like everything hinged on her believing him. Which ... it did. His entire life did.

“Please tell me the truth.” Tears sprang to her eyes. “Just talk to me like I’m Jodi and not your judge and jury, Zack.”

The hesitation he gave was all she needed.

She tugged out of his grip, air thin, mind slow. She needed to get out.

"I can't believe you did this," Zack snarled to Julian, and she felt like her line had been stolen.

"I know," Julian replied glibly. "Simply awful of me, isn't it? What can I say"—he slid his hands in his pockets while slipping out the door—"I'm opportunistic like that."

The metal door snapped shut. Jodi stared after him, ignoring Zack. It was quiet with just the mess of paint and the gore of Julian's confession between them.

"Let me explain."

Her eyes pressed closed. He barreled on.

"It was an accident. It was one time. She was there for me when I was having a really bad day, and it was a mistake."

Jodi's throat closed. How many bad days had she sat with him for. How many mistakes had she watched him make.

"We didn't ... we didn't finish—"

"I have to go." Tears poured down her cheeks. She needed to clean up the scenic lab, but it would have to wait. "I have to go," she repeated, and turned over her shoulder to say clearly to him, "Don't follow me."

She took the side exit out to the parking lot, and muggy wind battered her face. She moved quickly across the asphalt, barefoot. Shoes left next to the paint can.

He didn't follow her out, and she realized that Julian would have. No matter what she told him to do, he would come after her.

*He's using you! You don't see that?!*

Was he? Could every positive thing be traced back to the subpoena?

Her feet carried her away from the noise of the gym and the car line for the kids who needed bailing out after only an hour. If she had a parent, she might have been able to call her own bailout. Her mind flew to the night Julian had come to pick her up when her dad was long gone. And the two-hour drive he'd flown through to get back to her, to save her from a party gone wrong.

Julian had known about Emily and Zack. For how long? Since it happened? Or since it came out in Emily's journal?

If the journal was right about *that*, what else was it right about? Had Emily tried to kill herself last April? Had Jodi inadvertently stopped her with her words? Had Lucy thrown a bottle at Emily from her car window?

Jodi was on Fair Oaks by the time her mind caught up with her body. There were no good sidewalks on the boulevard. She crossed at an intersection and kept walking to a less crowded street, her feet taking a beating against rocks and cigarette butts. She had her house key for her dad's. It was mostly inhabitable still and the only place she could go to be alone. That's all she wanted.

She walked home in her splattered prom dress, wondering how Zack could have possibly let himself do that to Emily. Had he been lying when he'd joined the conversation on how annoying she was, how strange? Did he have feelings for her that he hadn't wanted to admit? Jodi didn't know what was worse, Zack having feelings for Emily or him not. Because if he didn't ... and she was just there. Just convenient. What did that mean?

She got back to her dad's house, let herself inside, and set the water to hot in the tub. She sat on the edge of the porcelain in her painted prom dress and ignored the memory of how it had gotten that way as the water swirled black and pink around her feet. She cried, tears dripping into the bathwater.

She peeled her dress off and left it in a heap, shimmied into boxers and a tee, and slipped under the covers before the tears started to fall again.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

*“What color is your prom dress?”*

*Jodi closed her locker door to find Emily, standing too close. “It’s like an aquamarine thing,” she said noncommittally.*

*“Do you want to see mine?”*

*Jodi grimaced. “Sure.”*

*Emily showed her a picture on her phone. She was in front of a mirror, wearing a fluffy pink dress. Jodi stared at it.*

*“Is that ... I think Paige wore that dress to homecoming last year.”*

*Emily nodded brightly. Jodi’s eyebrows jumped. She thought she was gently letting her know that she’d need to change her dress. But Emily had done it on purpose?*

*“Well, I’m sure it will look good on you,” Jodi said. She started to walk away.*

*“So there’s a limo?”*

*She stopped, turning back to Emily. There was a limo. But Jodi didn’t know how Emily knew.*

*Jodi stared at her. “I think ... I think the limo is full, Emily.”*

*But Emily just smiled brightly. “Well, see you tomorrow night!” She tugged Jodi’s body into a firm hug that Jodi didn’t return. When Emily pulled back, her fingers traced down the side of Jodi’s face. “I can’t wait. You’re going to look so beautiful.”*

*Jodi swallowed. She should tell her. She should say, “Emily, you’re not coming in the limo.” But Jodi was always the one who had to go to movies*

*with her. She was always going over to her house to study. Why did Jodi have to be the one to break her heart?*

*“I’ll see you at the dance, okay?”*

*Emily just grinned.*

★ ★ ★

In the shower the next morning, Jodi scrubbed off the crusted gray paint, each patch a reminder of where Julian had put his hands. She took a rough rag and scraped until the flakes pried loose from her body. She washed the gel out of her hair and tried a bunch of self-care skin scrubs and facial masks—anything to keep her mind off the night before.

When a lazy knock broke over the front door, Jodi couldn’t be bothered to change out of her boxers and tee. She almost didn’t open it, but she knew she’d need to face Zack sooner or later. When the door swung open and Julian was there, leaning against the frame like he was getting paid to model those jeans, she swallowed and crossed her arms over her chest.

He shifted on his feet and said, “It was a shitty thing I did last night. And I’m sorry.”

Her heart plummeted. She felt the blood leave her face even as her neck heated. So Zack had been right. He had been using her. “Okay” was all she could manage.

“I shouldn’t have outed Zack like that,” he said. “What I *should* have done is forced him to tell you himself.”

Her pulse found its footing again. The “shitty thing” was telling her about Zack and Emily.

“How long have you known?”

“Since it happened.”

She pressed her lips together, anger and disgust rising in her throat. “And when was that?”

“End of spring break, I think.”

Jodi felt like a rock had lodged itself in her throat. Around April. Had Emily tried to kill herself afterward? She shook her head clear and refocused. “So he told you right after. Do Paige and Lucy know?”

He shook his head. "I really don't think so. I mean, from what I know, he only told me."

Jodi felt ill, so she moved onto the next awful thing to talk about.

"I don't really get why you kissed me," she said hesitantly.

"Yeah, me neither."

"Great. Awesome." She rolled her eyes and leaned on the back of the couch. "Let's just forget about it forever then, I guess."

"Sure." He swallowed, looking like he would say more, but then shifted gears. "Anyway. It really bothered me when Zack said I was using you for your testimony. And I just wanted to explain it wasn't true."

"Yeah, okay."

Jodi didn't know what she expected. She *hadn't* expected. Zack was supposed to be the one coming over to apologize first thing in the morning. Zack was supposed to be explaining himself. But instead, Julian Hollister had come over to make sure she was okay and that the air was clear between them.

And it was clear.

Crystal.

It was a kiss and it was over and that was that.

"You still have paint behind your ear," he said.

She jerked and reached up.

"Wrong ear." He grinned and stepped forward. His fingers held her jaw—just like they had last night—and his blunt nail tried to flake it off. Chills broke across her arms, and she forced herself to stay still so he wouldn't see.

Crystal clear.

He looked down at her lips, and her heart stuttered a beat.

She swallowed. "Um, before you kiss me again—"

"Presumptuous."

"—I need to know what you said to Emily that day."

The humor left his eyes, and slowly, his fingers slipped off her skin. He tucked his hands into his pockets. "If I tell you," he said, "I don't think we'll ever kiss again."

Her skin prickled, and not the pleasant way this time.

"Tell me."

He stepped back from her, and she felt the distance like a heavy wind.

“After Zack slept with her, I watched Emily. I tried to keep an eye on her, because if she felt like getting chatty with people about sleeping with Zack Thrasher ... then Zack was going to have to make a choice. Come clean or deny it.” He looked off over her shoulder and clenched his jaw. “I wasn’t thinking back then about statutory rape or anything like that. I was thinking about the social consequences, how people would see him differently. He’d really fucked up, and everyone would know it.

“She got way weirder after spring break. I don’t know if anyone else picked up on it, but she was everywhere at once, in every conversation, at every hangout. I thought at first that Zack was inviting her to make her feel better about what happened between them, but when I told him to cut it out, he denied it. But she was relentless. It was like she thought that sleeping with Zack made her one of us.”

Jodi chewed on the inside of her cheek and said, “The journal the police have says she tried to kill herself. In April, right around spring break.”

Julian narrowed his eyes. “I don’t know anything about that. She did not seem ready to give up on *anything* during those months.”

Jodi nodded, and let him continue.

“I didn’t see it until closer to prom, but something shifted last spring. Her attention wasn’t on Zack anymore.” His eyes flitted over her face. “It was on you. Like *you* were the one she wanted to be with, or be like, or something.”

Opening her mouth to deny it, Jodi paused, remembering Mrs. Needlemeyer’s notes: *Follow up about Jodi Dillon.*

*Said Jodi was the only person who cared about her in the entire world.*

Despite the thoughts running in her mind, Jodi said, “That doesn’t make sense.”

Julian’s lips quirked. “Doesn’t it? Wasn’t she bothering you most out of everyone toward the end? You were the only one who gave her the time of day.”

“She—she was still in love with Zack. She talked about him with me all the time.”

He shrugged. “Maybe she knew that was what you wanted to talk about.”

Jodi scowled at him. “Get to the point.”

“When we started making plans for prom, I could see that Emily thought she was going with us. She was talking about matching dresses and corsages, where we were going to dinner. So, yes, I did tell her I’d get her a corsage like ours.”

Jodi’s breath caught. “Why did you do that?”

“Because I thought she was gonna tell everyone about sleeping with Zack. I didn’t do it to trick her. You can check with the florist—there was a spare corsage that was never picked up. I told her she could go get it herself when it was clear she wasn’t in the limo with us.”

“Is that what you texted her that day?”

He paused, and she felt her breath wobble on a string.

“That’s what I told the police the text said.” His jaw was tense, and his eyes slid off over her shoulder, like he’d prefer not to look at her.

Jodi swallowed. “But that’s not the truth,” she said.

“No. I told her that in person, the day before prom when I told her to stay away from you.”

She stared at him, and then a snort burst from her. “From me? What do you mean?”

He ran a hand through his hair. “I was going to make sure she knew she wasn’t in the limo. I didn’t want any more people claiming we Thrashed somebody just because she couldn’t take a fucking hint.” He blew out a breath. “She said, ‘Me and Jodi are going together, so I guess she won’t be in the limo, either.’ And the way she said it, Jodi ... it was like you had talked about it, but I *knew* we were all going stag.”

She crossed and uncrossed her arms, trying to fight the unease in her chest.

“So I gave the truth to her. I said, ‘Jodi doesn’t like you. Zack doesn’t like you. Nobody likes you, Emily.’”

Jodi felt her chest contract. She remembered Emily’s words through Kiera at the rose garden. *No one’s ever talking to me. Only about me. Isn’t that what you said?*

“That’s cruel, Julian.”

“It wasn’t,” he bit out. “It’s what needed to be done. You and Zack go around making friends with anybody, and me and Lucy and Paige have to pick up the pieces. I’m *always* stuck doing the dirty work.”

Her throat was tight. *You and Zack*. Like she'd been in this position before.

"Did you cut Oliver out during freshman year?" she asked.

He blinked at her, then rolled his eyes. "Come on, Jodi. *You* cut him out. If you really wanted to keep hanging out with that asshole, you would have. We weren't all going to be one happy family—"

"Okay, I got it," she snapped. "So, you told Emily we hate her. And somehow you're still innocent of instigating her suicide."

He reared back. "I never said that," he whispered. Jodi felt chills crest across her skin. "She doubled down. She said she was going to tell everyone about her and Zack. She wanted you to hate him and choose her."

Jodi rubbed her eyes. "That's ... that's so dumb, Julian. Are you sure that's what she meant?"

"She said, 'if I tell Jodi about me and Zack, maybe she'll finally be free of him.' It wasn't that hard to interpret. Anyway, that's when I told her to stay away from you, that you were officially off-limits to her. And I..."

Jodi glanced up at him as he trailed off. "What?"

He looked up at the ceiling. "I 'laid hands on her.' I think that's what the DA called it."

Her brows furrowed, trying to understand. "What does that mean?"

He swallowed. "I hardly remember it. I had her cornered. I got in her face, and I guess I 'touched her in a threatening way.'" He used finger quotes. "It was after school on Friday. No one was around, I thought, but someone still saw us talking."

"So were you 'talking' or were you 'touching her in a threatening way'? Which is it?" Jodi's eyes searched his face.

He paused, and she held her breath. He had a far-off expression on his face. "You know, immediately after, I thought to myself, *is this how my dad feels?*" He ran an agitated hand through his hair. A wry laugh burst from his chest. "Like, do I frustrate him this much that he just..."

Jodi's throat clicked and her eyes stung.

He was still staring at something past her shoulder when he said, "I didn't hit her. I wouldn't. I didn't shove her. I think I hit the locker we were standing in front of. I remember the rumble of the metal after, but I didn't put my hands on her. Maybe it looked that way."

"Who saw it?" Jodi asked.

“I don’t know. They didn’t say.”

“So you scared her? The day before prom?” Jodi’s heart was cracking.

Julian hummed. “That was the problem, Jodi. I *didn’t* scare her.” He shifted, and his eyes finally lifted to hers. “I met the real Emily Mills that day. She was fucking smiling at me. The whole time. No matter what I said or how much I invaded her space. And then...”

He cracked his neck and blew out a laugh.

“What?” she said.

“She asked me if I liked you.” He looked at her quickly. “And I didn’t, just to clarify. Still don’t, really.”

“Thanks,” she said drily. “Same to you.”

“But she got it in her head that I wanted you—which I didn’t—”

“So you’ve said.”

“And it really bugged me. She said it, and it didn’t land with me. But she was so fucking sure about it. So obnoxious. It really got to me.”

Jodi quirked a smile. “Is this how Emily Mills has been haunting you, Julian? She planted an idea in your head, and now you’re kissing me in the theater lab?”

His eyes flashed to her, serious and anxious, before crinkling to return the smile. “I guess so.”

Jodi refocused. “What did you text her?” she asked quietly.

He paused and rubbed his neck. “I just want you to know that I was trying to help you. I wanted her to see she was wrong and to back off.”

She felt her heart drop. “What is it?” she whispered.

“I collected everything.” He didn’t meet her eyes, and Jodi’s palms began to sweat. “Everything we’d said about her in private. Everything she didn’t know. It took me all night. I put it in a Google Drive and texted her the link.”

“What do you mean *everything*?”

“Texts, Discord chats, DMs. Our group chats.”

Jodi’s head was reeling. “That was private.” Her voice was thin.

“She needed to know, Jodi—”

“She didn’t. She was harmless.”

“Harmless?” he scoffed. “She forged a journal to punish us from beyond the grave! Would you really think she was harmless if she had accused Zack last year?”

Fuming, Jodi said, “Show me the Google Drive. I want to see it.”

“I deleted it. I wiped the text from my phone and deleted the drive the second I saw the ambulances on her street.”

She felt her blood boiling. “You really don’t have any other copy? That’s not like you.”

His jaw tightened, and then he reached into his pocket for his keys. He began untwirling a flash drive off the loop. Jodi had always thought it was a Juul. When he extended it to her, she stared up at him.

“Here,” he said, when she didn’t take it.

She stretched her fingers out for it. “What you sent to Emily the day of prom is on here? You just carry it on you at all times?”

He nodded. “In case they got a warrant for my house.”

Staring down at the blue flash drive, she said, “And you’re just ... giving it to me? What, no pleading with me not to show it to the police?”

Julian took a deep breath. “Just ... do what you have to. I want this to be over.”

Jodi’s eyes snapped up to him. He looked so tired. Almost defeated.

“You heard from Fordham,” she whispered, guessing.

He swallowed and shifted his weight. “I’m rejected whether I’m innocent or not. The result of my trial won’t change that.”

Jodi was trying to think of what to say—to encourage him that there was life outside of Fordham and college, to promise she wouldn’t rat him out—but she couldn’t do either.

He turned to her front door, hand on the knob, before twisting back to her. His eyes were clear and fierce as he said, “I never wanted her to die. I wanted her to disappear.”

Jodi took in his earnest expression, the hope that she understood him. But he would never understand *her*. Or Emily.

“That’s the same thing to girls like us.”

His eyes darkened, like he would argue the point. But he just opened the door and stepped through.

Jodi waited for the engine of his truck to start before heading for the computer. She paced in front of the screen as it took eons to warm up, and then inserted the flash drive. She opened the solitary folder labeled *Bio Homework* and found hundreds of images. Screenshots of text conversations. Saved Snapchat videos. Downloaded Discord chats.

Her fingers were trembling as she opened a Snapchat video.

Lucy and Zack were in the Thrashers' kitchen. His back was turned to the camera as he flipped pancakes in his pajamas. Lucy sidled up to him and stared at him with wide eyes and a vacant expression. She said, "You probably make the best pancakes out of anyone in the entire world," in a dreamy voice.

Zack chuckled, still unaware he was being filmed. "It's just Bisquick."

"No but you're, like ... doing it so well," Lucy said, widening her eyes and stepping closer to him. "I wish I could make pancakes as good as you."

Zack turned to her curiously, then noticed the camera pointed at him. His face broke into a smile. "Are you being Emily?"

Lucy cackled. Jodi could hear Julian's laugh as he filmed. The video ended on Zack beaming at the joke.

Jodi clicked out, going to some of the texts instead. The first one she clicked was from the group text the five of them had. She saw the date at the top: March 27, 2024.

Julian  
are we still going to the lake on sat

Paige  
im down  
Zack  
tight  
Lucy  
I swear to god zack if you invite emily I will throw her in the lake  
maybe with weights tied to her ankles  
Jodi



Jodi winced seeing her message. Julian could have cut it off after Lucy's threat to get the point across, but he'd included her. She chose one of the other screenshots.

Paige  
emily just asked me where im applying to college  
why do i feel like shes about to get a jump start on her app to brown  
Zack  
probbly  
Lucy  
she is. shes going to follow you to class and kill your roommate and then  
lock you in your dorm so you can be together forever  
Jodi  
College Admission Essay / Emily Mills

**I've known Paige Montgomery for only twenty minutes, but we are destined to share the same 8x8 box. Please admit me so I can continue clipping pieces of her hair. My extensions are almost ready.**

Julian

**Fuck** 😄😄😄

Paige

**its too accurate help**

Her stomach was churning. Jodi rubbed her brow. All she'd wanted was to make her friends laugh. She specifically remembered feeling almost proud when Julian had laughed. Now there was something twisting and tight in her chest.

Emily was never supposed to see this. Jodi had trusted that these four people would never share these messages. She ground her teeth, thinking of how Julian had betrayed their confidence.

The screenshots got worse for Jodi as the year went on. At one point, Jodi had documented an entire conversation between herself and Emily. They'd been talking about homework, but Emily kept changing the subject to sex, digging for information on each of their sex lives. Jodi had made Emily sound unhinged—and, in retrospect, that's how it had felt. But she shouldn't have told the others about it like that.

Another conversation from the beginning of May made her sweat.

Jodi

**please please please please please please somebody be free tonight  
emily just suckered me into hanging out**

Julian

**your own fault**

Jodi

**i know that**

Lucy

**Say you forgot your dad was in town**

Jodi

**SHE ALREADY MADE SURE HE WASNT**

**SHE IS A MASTER AT THIS**

**FUCKING FUCK AAAAAHHHHHHHHHH**

Julian

**amateur**

Zack

**I have practice! sorry**

Paige

**what are your plans?**

Jodi

**i wanna see a movie so i don't have to talk to her**

Lucy

**thats good**

**god its like a bad date youre tryna get out of**

Jodi

**fucking exactly**

Paige

**ill go to the movie IF AND ONLY IF you sit in the middle seat**

**i will tear her face off if i see her watching me watch the movie like last time**

**AND i get to pick the movie**

Jodi

**QUEEEEEEN BITCH thank you thank you thank you**

Her head was spinning. She swallowed back the bile in her throat as she imagined Emily reading these texts—ones sent only weeks before her death. It was clear that Jodi didn't want to spend time with her, that Jodi laughed at her behind her back, and that Jodi considered her a burden.

If what Julian said was true, if Emily did shift her focus onto *her*, then Jodi could only imagine how heartbreaking it was to read through this. To watch Snapchats and private TikToks either making fun of her or filming her without her knowledge, zooming in on her face, staring at Zack in adoration as that Police song about "I'll be watching you" played in the background.

Jodi forced herself to look through it all. By the end, there were tears tracked down her cheeks, and her stomach was in knots.

Julian may have handed this over, but Jodi had no doubt that her own messages were the final straw for Emily.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

She hardly heard the knock at the front door. She had one fleeting hope that Zack had come to apologize before she opened the door and Oliver Burns stood there.

“Hey, I thought I saw people coming in and out.”

Jodi nodded and crossed her arms over her stomach. “Yeah, I’m just grabbing a few things. What’s up?”

Oliver’s eyes flitted over her face, taking in her red skin and puffy eyes. When he didn’t ask, Jodi felt such gratitude. Zack would have asked. Zack wouldn’t have let it go.

“So, I got a call from Calloway this morning. I guess somebody broke into the shop and opened a bunch of paint cans?” he said. Jodi felt her chest relax. “She says it doesn’t look like they fucked up anything, but she wants us to go check it out.”

“That was me,” she sighed. “I went in there during the dance and worked.”

Oliver’s brows shot up. “Oookay. Did you ... It’s kind of a mess, Jodi —”

“Yeah, I’m sorry. I had to leave quickly.” She looked away from him. “I can go in today and close the paint, salvage what I can of the brushes.”

He nodded slowly, looking her over.

*Don’t ask. Don’t ask.*

“Cool.” He shrugged. “Do you want a ride over there?”

Jodi thought about the fifty other screenshots on the flash drive. The amount of people she wanted to ignore right now, and the weight of the

decisions she had to make.

“That would be great.”

She changed into some old paint clothes and met Oliver out at the curb. His beat-up car chugged them toward school as they sat in silence. When she got into the lab and saw the footprints in paint, the spray of gray over the tables, the ecstasy of last night washed over her again, followed by the devastation. Her heels still lay under one of the tables.

Oliver didn’t say a word as they capped the paint cans, scrubbed out the brushes, and took rags to the walls and tables that had gotten messy with Jodi and Julian’s paint fight. He didn’t ask what kind of mess this was or why she left it.

After half an hour had passed, she looked up from the lab table and watched Oliver’s back as he stood at the sink.

“Did I Thrash you freshman year?”

He continued like he hadn’t heard her. Then his voice lilted to her. “I thought you didn’t believe in that word.”

“You told the investigators that you were Thrashed. They told me the examples you gave them, like Paige’s hair at homecoming and Lucy’s pool party—”

“Oh, that was nice of them.”

“Did Julian and Zack say something to you?”

“They didn’t have to. It’s always the lack of attention with people like them.” He turned off the water and grabbed a towel to squeeze the brushes dry. “I believe you when you say that Zack has no idea what’s going on ... ever. But it was pretty clear after Halloween freshman year that I was no longer welcome.”

Jodi’s brows furrowed. “Halloween?”

He looked up at her. “You don’t remember?”

She searched her memory. It was a party at a bowling alley. It was actually Jodi’s idea. They’d gone as the Ninja Turtles—the girls in spandex, Zack in a green suit, and Julian as a side character Jodi had never heard of. It was probably Jodi’s favorite Halloween since high school started. There were about twenty other kids from school there.

“Were you not invited?” Jodi asked hesitantly.

Oliver’s lips curved into a cruel smile. “I was. I was there. There were six to a lane, and I joined yours. And when I came back from the bathroom,

the game had started, and there were only five names on the screen. The Thrashers only.”

Jodi’s heart pounded in her throat, choking her. “Oliver…”

“And you don’t even remember me being there, Jodi. So there’s your answer.”

She wanted to fight the idea that she was to blame. She wanted to ask if he made an effort to say hi. She wanted to blame him for not speaking up about it. But she bit her tongue and accepted the hit.

“I was really distracted that night. And I didn’t think about you. I’m sorry.”

Oliver chuckled. “Well, don’t apologize three years later. And you weren’t distracted. You were pretty focused on Zack—on how to be special to him. You’ve always had your focus there.”

She nodded, swallowing back tears. “Yeah. Yeah, that’s always been the case.”

“It’s whatever. In the past.” He dropped the clean brushes back into the brush jar. “We’re friends now.”

She felt her chest warm, hearing him acknowledge it. Jodi grabbed her forgotten shoes from last night and fiddled with the buckle as she tried to form the question she wanted to ask.

“I know things now,” she said softly, thinking about Zack, about Julian. “Things I didn’t know before, when I was questioned.”

She checked in with him. He tilted his head at her, and his magenta hair fell into his eyes. He shook it back with a flick and sighed.

“Well, you can stay quiet, like a good little Thrasher. You aren’t fighting for your own innocence, so it’s not like you have a reason to trade information.”

Hearing him say it was like a warm breeze washing over her. *I could.*

“Or,” she prompted.

“Or…” He smiled at his shoes.

She took a deep breath, thinking it over. Sending Zack to jail. Giving Julian up to the investigators.

“What do you know about Reagan seeing Lucy throw the bottle?” she asked.

“I think it’s bullshit. But she does live on the street where it happened, so ... I dunno.”

Jodi picked at one of her cuticles and said, “Someone told me Emily was obsessed with me at the end. That it wasn’t about Zack anymore.”

“Ohhhh yeah.” Oliver laughed, grabbing his keys. “That’s definitely true.”

She stared after him as he headed toward the exit. “How ... Why? I don’t get it.”

He pushed open the door and stopped to wait for her. “That’s your problem, Jodi. You’ve always thought there’s someone more special, more deserving. Zack Thrasher’s life, his comfort, his happiness—it’s always been more important to you than anyone else’s.”

She followed him out and let her mind race as she sat in his car. He pulled out of the parking lot, and just as he flicked his blinker to turn left, she said, “Can you take me to Zack’s house?”

★ ★ ★

Charity Thrasher let her in with a curious expression, explaining that Zack was probably still asleep.

“That’s fine. Can I just hang out by the pool?”

She took one look at Jodi’s paint-smeared sweats, oversize T-shirt, and determined face, and sent her outside with a smile. Jodi watched the water move in the pool, focusing on what she’d come to say. Ten minutes later, when the back door slid open and Zack’s tousled head appeared, he nodded to the pool house and followed her inside.

He looked like shit. Surprisingly. Dark circles under his eyes and puffy skin. She wondered if he’d drunk himself into a coma on her account.

She didn’t sit on the comfortable couches that had been a second bed to her for all these years. She stood in the center of the room and watched him cross his arms in front of his chest.

“You told me,” she said, “on the night you were arrested. You told me you didn’t do it.”

His eyes flicked away.

“You cried. I held you as you cried, because you were innocent, because you were afraid.”

“I am innocent,” he said, gaze snapping back. “I didn’t *rape* her. We had sex—or started to—” Jodi swallowed thickly. “And it was consensual. I don’t deserve to go to jail for it.”

She cleared her throat. “You can’t pretend you didn’t know it wasn’t legal, Zack.”

“Oh, and we don’t do *anything* illegal, you and me, right?” His voice was crisp and direct. His eyes narrowed. “McKinley Park after curfew. Driving without a license?”

“Are you really turning the things I do for you—for *you*—back on me? Driving drunk is also illegal, but I didn’t see you volunteering to stay sober —”

“Whatever.” He waved his hand, like she was a buzzing fly. “What do you want?”

The dismissal was like an arrow to her chest.

“I’d like Emily Mills to still be alive,” she snapped. “Can you do that? I’d like not to be dragged into a courtroom to testify against everyone I love. I’d *really* like to have the three thousand dollars I spent on a lawyer for all this back—”

“What the fuck, Jodi? Like—Jesus.” His hand raked through his hair. “If you want money, I can give you money.”

She flinched, like he’d slapped her. His expression was irritated, quizzical. She waited for him to realize what he’d said, what he’d ignored, but it never happened.

She inhaled deeply, pulling her thoughts together.

“I came over to give us a chance to talk about this. But I don’t think we’re ready. So I’m giving you a heads-up that I’m not lying anymore—about *anything*. If I’m asked about this under oath, I’m telling the truth.”

His eyes widened as she moved toward the door, pacing around him.

“Are you serious? You really think I should go to jail for—”

Jodi spun back to him. “Why did you sleep with her?” she yelled. “Zack, did you *like* her?”

“No! I mean, she was fine. I never hated her like you all did.”

“But did you have feelings for her?”

His fingers scraped down his face. “No.”

“Then why?”

“She was there! She was there, in front of me, offering, okay? I’m not proud of it, obviously, but she was there and she was listening to me and she was...” He sighed. “She was really *seeing* me, okay?”

“I’ve been there,” Jodi whispered. “I’ve been listening. I’ve been *seeing* you for *ten years*, Zack. Don’t pretend you don’t know!”

He blinked at her.

“Don’t pretend you haven’t loved it—the knowledge that you can have *any* of us.”

He swallowed. “What are you...”

“She was *there*? That’s such bullshit. You had the upper hand with Emily, and you *know* it. I would have given *anything* for you to look at me—to listen to me, to see me—and think, ‘she’s here.’ *I’ve been here.*”

He looked out the window at the pool, and she saw his eyes moving quickly, calculating. Her own were overflowing.

“But instead, you chose to take your clothes off with someone who you barely knew. So clearly, she was giving you something I haven’t been. Clearly, you were attracted to her, or enchanted by her, or fucking something, Zack. Because she wasn’t just *there.*”

The tip of his nose was red as he sniffed. “I liked being liked by her. That’s all.” He turned to Jodi. “And maybe I did know about you. About how you felt. I don’t think I really knew how *I* felt until I lost you.”

She rolled her eyes at his garbage clichés. “Lost me? When?”

His jaw clenched. “How long has this thing been going on with Julian?”

Breath puffed out of her in a laugh. “Like, twenty-four hours, okay? So, relax.” She shook her head. “You didn’t come after me, Zack. I—I walked home last night. And this morning, Julian was the first person on my doorstep.” His eyes narrowed, but she continued, “But even before that. You haven’t been putting me first for a long time. Probably since, like second grade, to be honest. But I’ve been putting you first every second of every day since then. I don’t want to have pieces of a person.”

“Julian isn’t the type of person to put you first, either,” he snarled.

“Yeah, but I didn’t ask him to. Like I said: twenty-four hours.”

Zack stepped forward, grabbing her hands. Jodi looked down at them.

“I can try. I can be better at putting you first,” he said. She watched him swallow, watched his eyes flicker between hers. “We could try ... to be something new, too.”

Jodi stepped back. Her stomach was roiling. “This timing sucks, Zack. You didn’t feel any of this before your best friend kissed me.”

“But maybe I did!” He gripped her hands tighter. “Maybe I just didn’t want to fuck it up—”

“No.” She watched his brows furrow. “No, thank you. If that were true, I think you wouldn’t have slept with Lucy sophomore year, you wouldn’t have hooked up with that German girl last summer, you wouldn’t have pursued Kiera or any of the others. I think ... I just told you I wasn’t going to lie for you anymore, and you decided you had feelings for me—”

“That’s not what I’m doing. I promise you, Jo. I ... If you don’t think we should try now, then that’s fine.”

She pressed her lips together, not bothering to correct his assumption that “no” meant “not now.”

“Zack, I don’t want you to go to jail. But I’m not perjuring myself, or whatever, if they ask me something under oath. Not for anyone.” She watched his jaw click. “The Millses are actually really nice. You should consider telling the truth and letting them forgive you.”

His mind was running as she stepped around him and headed out of the pool house. His footsteps followed her solemnly as she walked straight into the Thrasher house, turned right at the doorway, and knocked on the office she’d so rarely been inside.

“What are you doing?” Zack said behind her, as his father asked, “Yes?”

Jodi turned to look at Zack. His eyes were wide and scared.

“I told you,” she said, “I’m telling the truth now.”

Zack reached for her as she pushed open the door and greeted Greg.

“I have information for Zack’s lawyer. For everyone’s lawyer, actually,” she said. “How should I get that to them?”

Greg clicked his pen and set it down. “What kind of information?”

“The journal the police have is a fake. And I can prove it.”

His brows lifted up to his hairline. She knew if she turned, she’d find Zack’s doing the same.

“How’s that?” Greg prompted.

“Well, I know for a fact that the glass bottle incident didn’t happen to Emily.”

“How?”

Her knees wobbled, but she stood her ground.

“Because it happened to me.”

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

By the end of the day, she'd told the story three times—once to Greg, once to Zack's attorney, and once to Lucy's. Tomorrow she'd write a sworn statement that would be disseminated to all four lawyers. It would say that on March 1, 2024, Hank Dillon had gotten drunk and thrown a bottle at his daughter, resulting in a contusion on her shoulder. Jodi would swear that the only person who knew about this until now was Emily Mills, who asked intimate details about the event. Tomorrow, each of the defense teams would submit a request for a search warrant of the Millses' home to discover the journal in the upstairs bathroom.

And then there would be nothing to do but wait.

When Jodi had finished telling it the first time, she'd ignored Zack's presence behind her in the doorway and focused on Greg. Her voice had wobbled, but she'd gotten it out.

Greg had stared at her over steepled fingers, and then said, "Does your father get violent with you often?"

"Not often, but Zack can verify that I have—um, felt unsafe before. So can Julian. And probably Oliver Burns." She'd thought it was important to give as many witnesses as possible. As many people who could corroborate.

But Greg had nodded and asked softly, "And where are you living now?"

It wasn't until she'd responded "With my aunt and grandma" that she realized Greg wasn't asking questions as a lawyer, but as a father. Her eyes had welled with tears, and she'd sniffed them back.

He'd explained that because she was eighteen, there wouldn't be any involvement from Child Protective Services, but she would need to prepare for the real possibility that her father would face legal action after this came out.

Jodi was still ruminating on that as Greg drove her to Rosa's. Zack had offered, but she'd asked Greg instead. She needed space from him, and his silent presence during her confession to Greg felt like it was drowning her.

Her leg was bouncing as they pulled into Rosa's driveway. "Will my dad go to jail?" Her voice was thin and scratchy.

"Not necessarily. He could be fined or receive probation. If you'd like to pursue jail time for him, I can assist—"

"No. I don't want him to go to jail. I didn't want any of this." She looked down at her hands. "I just needed to tell the truth about a few things..."

She realized that almost every person she cared about was facing jail time at this moment. Rubbing her forehead, she thanked Greg for the ride and promised to call him if she needed anything.

Rosa was ranting before she'd even opened the front door. Jodi apologized for staying out all night and all day and then asked her to sit down.

"We have to talk about my dad."



Rosa screamed and cried for an hour. Jodi made her promise she wouldn't attack her dad when she saw him. They drove to the motel he was staying at while they figured out what to do with the house. When he opened the door, he smiled so big it almost broke Jodi's heart in two.

"Jo, hey," he said. "This is a nice visit." He glanced behind her to Rosa, her arms crossed and her eyes boring holes into him. "Rosa."

He seemed sober, thankfully, and when Jodi and Rosa came inside, there were no beer bottles cluttering the tables and nightstands.

"I have something to talk with you about," Jodi said. Her voice caught and her body wanted to flee.

“Okay,” he said, sitting down on the end of the bed. Rosa sat at the small table near the window, and Jodi stood between them, facing her dad.

“I ... I don’t like it when you drink.” Tears sprung into her eyes, and she felt like they’d drown her if they were let loose. “You get mean.”

Dad blinked at her, and then he seemed to deflate. He glanced at Rosa before saying to Jodi, “I need to cut back. I know. I’m sorry—”

Rosa snorted, interrupting him. Jodi waved her hand at her, reminding Rosa to let her talk.

“You get mean when you drink,” Jodi continued, realizing she could just say it quickly and be done. “And you have thrown things at me. Bottles. You threw a bottle at me once and it hit me.”

Her dad’s mouth opened slowly, staring at her slack-jawed. “What?” he asked quietly.

Jodi’s hands were shaking, so she stuffed them in her pockets.

“A beer bottle hit me once, and it left a bruise. I’m sorry to tell you this, but due to some things with the Emily Mills case, I had to tell the police about that.” She sniffed back her tears. “I would never press charges against you—”

“And she should!” Rosa yelled. “Your only daughter, Hank! The last thing either of us have of Josephine, and you—”

“Rosa,” Jodi said firmly. “Can you please wait outside now?”

Rosa stomped to the door with a glare, muttering under her breath. Once she’d slammed it closed, Jodi turned back to her father.

He was staring at the thinly carpeted floor. A solitary tear was trailing down his cheek.

Jodi looked at the ceiling, begging her own tears to fall back into her eyes.

“Jodi...”

When he didn’t say anything else, Jodi plowed forward.

“I got into CalArts. I didn’t think I could tell you because you’d be upset about money, but I’m really excited to go. I’m working on doing backdrops for theater and painting sets. It hurt my feelings when you didn’t come see *Our Town* last fall.” Her throat clicked, and her tears fell without warning. She felt her air being constricted, like water was lapping at her lungs. “You were available, you were just drunk. I came home after a show and you were asleep on the chair. You could have come.”

“I’m sorry. I’m...” He ran a hand over his head, still not meeting her eyes. “I should have been there. I’m sorry you didn’t feel you could tell me about college. And I’m sorry that I threw something at you, Jodi.” He finally looked up at her. “I love you. I don’t want to hurt you.”

She nodded at him, letting more tears fall.

“I’m gonna stop,” he said. “I’m done. I want you to watch me pour out what’s in the fridge.” He gestured to the little mini fridge.

“It’s okay. I trust you to do it.” Jodi sniffed. “Thank you for apologizing. I’m sorry that I had to tell the police.”

He waved his hand. “No, it’s fine. What happened with your friend Emily?”

Jodi gave him a very brief version of the story. Her legs were shaking, so she sat in Rosa’s empty chair.

“I have a few more months in Sacramento,” she said, “and I want to see you, but I don’t want to live with you.”

“I understand.” His chin wobbled. “We’ll get to Topgolf. And of course, I’ll be there for graduation.”

She smiled weakly. “I have to go. I have a lot to do.” Jodi took a deep breath and stood.

Neither of them moved for a hug, and Jodi was grateful. It was too raw. Her skin felt like fried electrical wires.

As she reached for the door handle his quiet voice floated to her.

“It’s hard, Jo. It’s really hard to not have the life you imagined. And to be alone for it.” His eyes lifted from the floor to look at her.

“You weren’t alone,” she said softly.

Her dad took a deep breath through his nose, his lips pressed tightly together. He nodded. “No. I wasn’t alone. I forgot that sometimes.”

Jodi chewed on the inside of her cheek, deciding if there was more to say or not. She opened the door and whispered, “See you soon” before closing it behind her.

The sunlight burst over her skin as she turned to face Rosa. She breathed deep, like coming up for air after being underwater for too long.

“It’s done,” she said. Rosa took her home.

On Monday morning, Jodi found Lucy standing at her locker before the first bell.

“Hi.” Jodi smiled weakly, but before she could say anything else, Lucy swept her into a hug.

“You didn’t have to do this,” Lucy said. “This has got to be really rough for you.”

Burying her face in Lucy’s shoulder, Jodi breathed in her scent. She felt like she hadn’t been hugged like this in months.

Jodi finally released her and stepped back. “I did have to. I don’t want anything bad to happen to my dad, but I also don’t want anything bad to happen to you. Any of you.”

Lucy nodded. “As soon as the police have custody of that second journal, my lawyer thinks the prosecution is going to drop everything. Hey, how did you know about that second journal?”

“I sorta ... went looking for it.” Jodi winced. “I visited the Millses under false pretenses and snooped around.”

Lucy’s lips curled into a devilish grin. “Jodi Dillon, you badass.”

Jodi laughed and shuffled her feet.

“Also,” Lucy said, pushing her hair behind her ear, “Did I hear something about you and Julian?”

“Oh, dear. Look at the time.” Jodi grabbed her books and shut her locker, fighting the blush on her cheeks as Lucy cackled.

She spent the rest of the morning wondering what she wanted to say to Julian. Finally by the end of the day, she found him waiting for her outside her last class. Jodi chewed on her lip as she approached.

“I hear there are some very exciting developments happening with the Emily Mills scandal today,” he said, tilting his head with a smirk.

“There probably are.” She took a deep breath. “I’m headed to the theater building for tech rehearsal. Walk with me?”

He fell into step beside her. “The play opens this weekend?”

“Yeah. My part’s almost done, so now I just have to worry about Nikita’s costume changes.”

He cleared his throat. “So, look. I thought I’d hear from you after I left your dad’s. Maybe, like, a lot of yelling or crying. Or a brick thrown through my truck window.”

“I had to get my head on straight about it.” She glanced up and saw him looking at his shoes as they walked. “Sending that to her was not okay. So much of it was private. Things I never would have said if I’d known she would see it.”

He nodded. “I know.”

“I can’t pretend I don’t know about it.”

“I know.”

She stopped walking and faced him. “You do?”

“Jodi, I knew what I was doing when I gave you that USB.” There was that look in his eyes again, like he was tired. He stepped back and tossed over his shoulder, “Leave me a ticket at the box office, yeah?” as he walked away.

Jodi stared after him, wrapping her mind around the next truth she had to tell and wishing she’d had more time with this version of him.



Jodi sat at the coffee shop a few blocks from school on Tuesday morning, sipping something sugary. Her knee was bouncing under the table as she kept an eye on the door.

When it swung open at precisely 7:30 A.M., Jodi’s hands jerked to her cup while Detective Harding swept her eyes over the coffee shop. As she dropped into the chair opposite her, Jodi noticed that Harding’s makeup was perfect, her blouse crisp, and her hair pulled tight. She set her designer bag—fake, but it was a good try—on the chair next to her and smiled.

“Miss Dillon. Glad to see you finally ‘remembered’ where Emily Mills’s cell phone could be,” she said sarcastically. “Now, what’s this about?”

Jodi reached into her pocket with shaking fingers and placed the USB drive on the table between them.

“What’s this?”

“This is what Julian Hollister texted Emily Mills the day she died.”

Harding’s eyes lost their faux-bored look, narrowing on Jodi’s face. She sat forward and folded her hands. “Is it? How do you know?”

“Because Julian gave it to me.”

Red lips pressing into a thin line, Harding stared at the USB. “What’s on it?”

“It’s ... I guess you could say, it’s proof that we didn’t like Emily Mills.”

“Who’s ‘we?’”

“The Thrashers. It’s a collection of screenshots, private conversations, private TikToks ... Stuff that Emily was never supposed to see.”

Harding sat back in her chair. She reached for the USB and plucked it up between her red nails. Her eyes flicked to Jodi. “Why did Julian Hollister give this to you?”

She swallowed. “Because we ... I don’t know. But we were maybe going to ... date, or not really but...”

Harding blinked at her, brows jumping. Her face pinched into an expression Jodi didn’t like. Something like pity.

“Jodi,” she said softly. “I’ve known people like your friends all my life. Boys like Zack, Julian—they don’t date girls like us.”

Jodi jerked her gaze away. Her eyes caught on Harding’s shoes, the fake Louboutins. Harding still wanted to be like *them*, even after fighting tooth and nail to get some petty high school revenge. In twenty years, Jodi didn’t want to still be worrying about whether or not she was a Thrasher.

Harding leaned forward. “Thank you for bringing this to me, Jodi. It was very mature of you to put Emily and the Mills family ahead of your own friendships.”

“I just wanted to tell the truth and be done with it.”

Harding nodded and dropped the USB into her bag. Jodi heard it land like a gavel.

“Wait,” Jodi said. “He texted her two things, you guys said. One was the link to this. What else did he say?”

Harding took a deep breath. “I suppose you’ll know soon enough. He sent her the link, and under it, he said *Jodi doesn’t care if you live or die.*”

It felt like a sword had been plunged through her chest. “That’s not ... that’s not true—”

“We know.” Harding’s mouth pressed into a quick grin. “But unfortunately for Julian ... it’s enough for intent.”

Intent. Jodi shivered. This was it. She had handed over the final nail in his coffin.

Standing from her chair, Harding swept to the door before stopping to turn on her painted heel.

“How does it feel?” she asked with a smile. “From all the evidence I’ve gathered, this is your first time.”

Jodi’s brows came together. “First time what?”

“Thrashing someone.” Harding smirked and waltzed out the door without waiting for her answer.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

JUNE

Paige was the first of them to be cleared.

Upon examining the first journal the police had in evidence, it was concluded that it was impossible to have been authored over the course of the school year—pressure of the pen, age of the pages. The journal found in the Millses’ bathroom, on the other hand, was accepted to be real. One by one, Jodi watched her friend’s charges be dropped.

They decided that Oliver Burns’s testimony of the Ride or Die incident wasn’t enough if they didn’t know who was driving, so without the journal, Paige was cleared. Once Jodi’s signed statement about her own identical incident with a glass bottle had been examined by both sides of the case, Reagan suddenly reconsidered if she had truly seen Emily on her street the day the soda bottle was allegedly thrown. All of Lucy’s charges were dropped, too.

Jodi got the text from Lucy just before the *West Side Story* rehearsal that Wednesday night. Lucy’s dad was already on the phone with his friend in the dean’s office at UCLA. Smiling down at her phone, Jodi typed back that she was glad just as the stage manager called for places.

Jodi set aside one ticket for Julian on the Friday show, but he would never make it.

On Friday morning, Julian Hollister pled guilty to criminal harassment of Emily Mills. The text message and the Google Drive, the eyewitness account of him “putting hands on her”—all of it was on the table even without the fake journal. The prosecution and the defense came to terms on a reduced sentence: six months at the Sacramento juvenile detention center.

He was taken into custody immediately following the plea bargain hearing. He would have to get his GED from juvie.

Jodi's heart was in her throat the entire performance, and by the time the curtain closed, she was already on her way to Rosa's car in the waiting zone.

"What's wrong?" Rosa asked.

Jodi buckled her seat belt and wiped away the tear trailing down her cheek. "Nothing. The play was really good tonight."

The DA's office wasn't as ready to talk plea deals with Zack. With his name on the group and his Mustang being used for the Ride or Die incident that Oliver witnessed, they still wanted to pursue him. Also, Emily had told her sister about having sex with Zack in painful detail, so Hannah was now considered a witness.

By finals week, Hannah was more ghostly than ever, shuffling down the hallways and staring off into space. Jodi asked Oliver if she'd been buying from him, but he'd told her no, not since a month ago.

On the last day of school, the DA's office and the defense for Zackary Thrasher called a meeting. Jodi waited at school after her last final, staring at her phone. Across the quad, she saw Hannah Mills doing the exact same. She considered approaching her, but her stomach was too knotted. If they went to trial, Jodi could be called to testify, and she would have to tell the truths that she knew.

It was almost five o'clock when her phone buzzed.

"Zack?" she said, picking up the call.

"It's done, Jodi!" She could hear his smile through the phone.

"What? What happened?"

"There was a date discrepancy. An intern on my defense team found it *yesterday*. Emily said 'Saturday' when she meant 'Sunday' and I had an alibi for the Saturday. Peter had canceled the morning session and we rescheduled for the evening. I guess the testimony from her sister was super hazy on which day, so the prosecution decided it wasn't worth it to put it in front of a jury!"

Jodi felt her smile dripping off her face, try as hard as she might to keep it there. "Wow. Peter Kim for the win. So you got off on a technicality?"

"Yeah, I guess." He kept his voice low. "They dropped all charges, like Paige and Lucy."

Jodi nodded, trying to unwind this feeling in her chest. “Yeah. Great.”  
Like Paige and Lucy.

But he *wasn't* like Paige and Lucy. Zack had actually done something wrong. But because of a wrong date, he didn't have to live with the consequences.

And Julian was in juvie.

Zack must have heard it in her tone. “What's wrong? Are you ... disappointed I didn't go to jail?”

Jodi cleared her throat. “No. I'm not disappointed.” She looked across the quad and saw a small blond girl with orange shoes on the phone, too. “I'm really happy it worked out, Zack. Call Paige and Lucy. I'll talk to you soon.” She hung up.

Hannah Mills jumped to her feet and took off toward the door leading inside. Jodi grabbed her things and followed.

Once in the hallway, Jodi looked left and right, and she found a halo of blond moving quickly toward the girl's bathroom.

Jodi pushed the door open. “Hannah?”

Hannah Mills stood at the sinks, tears falling down her cheeks.

“So he's innocent?”

There was something tight about her eyes, and her lips were cracked and chewed.

“They dropped the charges. Emily wrote the wrong date in her journal —”

“Wrong date? What wrong date?” Hannah swung around and forward, and Jodi almost stepped back.

“The date Zack allegedly had sex with her. Emily wrote Saturday instead of Sunday, and Zack had an alibi for Saturday.”

Hannah stared at her, rage building behind her eyes. Suddenly, a choking sound came from her throat, and her face crumpled. She paced away from her, and a scream tore from her throat.

“Hannah, I know this is upsetting—”

“You're the one who told them about the real journal, aren't you?” she mumbled. “My mom told me you came over. You went upstairs and looked for it, didn't you?”

Jodi stood frozen. She'd called it *the real journal*.

“I was thinking it might have been you,” Jodi said quietly. “You created the fake one?”

Tears streamed down Hannah’s cheeks. “It took me weeks. I had her handwriting perfect. I rewrote the entire thing. I had *every date* correct, I swear.”

Jodi knew to be careful. She couldn’t give Hannah any indication that she knew there was truth to the journal entry about Zack and Emily having sex.

“The journal in the wall—the real one—it stopped in April. But you created May entries?”

Hannah sniffed. “After Emily told me she’d had sex, she said ‘Journals are for kids. I’m an adult now.’ So I filled in the May dates myself.”

Jodi’s eyes narrowed. Something still didn’t make sense.

“Did Emily tell you about my dad throwing a bottle at me?”

Hannah wiped her nose with her wrist, nodding. “She told me everything about everything.”

So Hannah had twisted it and put it into the journal, something to hold against Lucy. “Why didn’t you accuse me of anything?” Jodi asked.

Hannah looked up at her with wet eyes. “You meant a lot to her. She wouldn’t have wanted that. But I’m sorry that I—” She cut off, biting her lip.

“What?”

“I’m sorry if I’ve been scaring you,” she said slowly.

It dawned on her. “Hannah, were you behind the text messages?”

She stared at the sinks. “I just wanted them to remember her. To feel guilt.”

“How did you do some of that?” Jodi thought about the text about the hair dye, the flare in Paige’s photos.

“I started hacking in seventh grade,” Hannah said flatly. “It wasn’t hard to get into your search histories.”

Jodi’s eyebrows lifted. She realized in both circumstances that she’d felt the text messages knew too much—when Jodi was thinking of trying a new hair dye and when she wanted tickets to the show in San Francisco—it wasn’t clairvoyance. It was her search history.

“What about the different numbers?” Jodi asked.

Hannah shrugged. "I bought burner phones. Tossed them when I was done with them."

Jodi's eyes narrowed. "Did you put that light in Paige's photos, too?"

"No?" Hannah looked at her curiously. "What light?"

Jodi felt a chill crest over her shoulders but waved away the question.

"Listen, Hannah. I know you're angry. I know you miss your sister. And maybe you don't think we got what we deserve, but you have to stop now. You did all you could to get the law to do their job. If you go any further with all of this, you could really get in a lot of trouble. It could ruin your life just as much as ours."

Hannah chewed on her lip, dead skin tearing off to reveal red, raw sections. She nodded.

"Theirs," Hannah said slowly. "I didn't want to ruin your life."

Jodi's stomach felt sick. "I *was* like them, though. I could be just as mean. Did Emily show you the Google Drive?"

"Pieces of it. When I looked through it, I said I needed to tell Mom, and she deleted it from her phone. I didn't even see which of them sent it to her."

Jodi nodded. "Well, I might have meant a lot to Emily, but I wasn't kind to her. Not like I should have been."

"You didn't like her," Hannah said matter-of-factly, shrugging. "It happens. But you don't have to like someone to be kind to them. You came over after school and talked with her. You let her annoy you. You gave her something to look forward to every day. I think that's being kind."

Jodi's vision blurred as she stared at the bathroom tiles. She supposed it was mostly true. It still didn't fix the ache in her chest when she thought about what was on that Google Drive.

Pushing back her tears, Jodi turned to Hannah. "Are you going to be alright? Do you have someone picking you up?"

Hannah sniffed and nodded. "I can get someone, yeah."

Jodi wondered if she should hug her, but settled for placing a hand on her shoulder. "You can talk to me about her, if you want. You have my number."

When Hannah didn't respond, Jodi moved on wobbly legs toward the door.

"Why were you late?"

Jodi spun back to her. Tears were spilling down Hannah's cheeks again. "When?"

"On prom night. In the limo. You were so late. She said you'd be there at seven."

Jodi felt bile creeping up her throat. "Hannah, I'm sorry, but Emily was never invited in the limo."

But Hannah's forehead was scrunched in confusion. She opened her mouth a few times before saying, "But she said to wait. She said, 'Jodi has to see.'"

Her heart pounded in her ears. "See what?"

"She said I had to wait. I didn't want to, but she said I couldn't—"

"Couldn't what?"

Hannah was sobbing, heaving for air.

"I wasn't allowed to scream until the limo pulled up," she wheezed. "But you were so late. And she wasn't waking up anymore. And by the time you came, she was already gone." Hannah looked up at her with her sister's pale, cold eyes. "Why were you so late?"

There was ice in Jodi's chest, a heavy weight in her stomach. Hannah didn't "find" her sister's body.

She was there—in the bathroom.

"Why did the police report say Emily's dress was wet?"

"Because she told me to turn the cold water on her every time she passed out. She said she had to stay awake until you came."

Hannah's voice broke into sobs. Jodi decided that if Emily were still alive, she would no longer have been so kind, as Hannah put it.

What would have happened if they'd pulled up in the limo to pick her up at seven? Jodi would have never left Emily's side again—she knew that now. She would have always tried to take care of her, the girl who'd almost died. She wouldn't have forgiven Julian for bullying her. If Emily told her Zack had slept with her, Jodi wouldn't have forgiven him, either.

Emily would have won. Jodi would have seen exactly what she was supposed to.

Jodi swallowed back the bile in her throat. "Hannah, I'm so sorry. Emily shouldn't have asked you to do that. We were never going to pick her up in the limo. She misunderstood."

Hannah's pink, wet face was pulled tight in pain. She lifted her hands to hide it.

"That was really wrong of her. I hope you know that, Hannah. It wasn't fair to you. And it wasn't your fault."

Jodi stepped forward and pulled Hannah into a hug. She let her cry on for a long time. When she was finally done, Jodi asked hesitantly, "Did Emily really try to kill herself in April? The first time?"

Hannah sniffed and shook her head. "I thought it was good for dramatic effect."

Jodi took a deep breath, exhaling the hatred she felt for Emily Mills at that moment, and pulled Hannah closer.

## Chapter Thirty

Jodi kept the new information she'd learned from Hannah to herself. Her friends were trying to move on, to put this behind them. She didn't want to imagine the tantrum Lucy would throw if she heard what kind of crazy Emily had been cooking up. She wanted to protect Hannah's identity as the mysterious texter, as long as the texts stopped.

When she sat down to think about it, Jodi decided that there were a lot of coincidences and freak accidents that happened to them all in the past year. If Hannah was behind the electronic stalking, then maybe that's all it was. The drive-in was old and rickety. Lucy's inhaler was overlooked in the panic. Paige's electrocution could have happened to anyone, and she had been preoccupied for months over Emily; dreaming of her while unconscious was understandable. The car crash was terrible, but Kiera hadn't been sleeping and even admitted later that someone had been harassing her online; it was probably Hannah. While Jodi did believe Nan was a legitimate medium after spending so much time with her, it didn't mean Emily was behind any of these events.

As time went on, nothing else happened. Jodi spent the summer with Rosa and her grandmother, visiting with her dad when he was in town. She hung out with Oliver and Nikita, who were both going to the East Coast. (She had an automatic invite and a couch to sleep on if she ever decided to visit.)

One day at the end of June, Jodi texted the group chat to check in. She didn't bother making a new one without Julian—it was easier to pretend

that way. She told them she was going to visit the cemetery and pay her respects at Emily's grave, if anyone else wanted to come.

Paige was the only one to respond. Paige picked Jodi up at Rosa's and they rode in friendly silence over to East Lawn, broken only by a few questions about next year.

Paige's admission to Brown hadn't been reinstated, but UC Irvine had pushed her through. She was already talking about transferring out of the UC after the first year, but then followed up with praise for the criminal justice program at Irvine—her new passion. Jodi had a feeling Paige would be just fine there.

"What are you gonna do?" Paige asked. "Last we talked, I think it was Southern California?"

"Yeah, I got into CalArts."

"You did?" Paige almost swerved the car. "Jodi, that's amazing!"

"Thanks." It hurt to think of how many times she had bitten her tongue not to mention it, but Paige had been fighting for her life. In many ways. "They have a theater design program that I got into."

"Amazing, babe. I'll totally drive up to see one of your plays!"

Jodi smiled. She wouldn't hold her to it.

They parked and followed the map to Emily's grave. Paige had bought flowers at the grocery store, but Jodi had settled for a tiny sketch on a slip of drawing paper—a girl with wide teeth and pale eyes, hair framing her face in sheets of gold.

There was a lot about Emily Mills that Jodi wished she knew when she was alive. She was manipulative and obsessive, but she was also taken advantage of in multiple ways. Jodi couldn't lie and say that she missed her, but she did wish things had been different. She wished she'd been more direct with her. Maybe if it had been Jodi to tell her the limo wasn't coming, Emily would have listened.

They found a simple grave with fresh flowers. Jodi was sure Maureen Mills came by often. She turned to look out over the rest of the tombstones, thinking about her mother's grave, here somewhere. She'd never been. Maybe she could bring herself to go before she headed to college. Maybe Rosa would like to come with her and leave flowers.

"I'm sorry, Emily." Paige's voice was harsh, like the words had burst from her chest before her mouth had gotten the message. "I was mean to

you and I lied to you. I would take it all back in an instant, and I know that means nothing...”

She choked off, turning her eyes down to her shoes. Jodi reached out and slipped her fingers through Paige’s.

“I’m not getting the flare in my pictures anymore,” Paige said to her quietly. “Isn’t that weird? Do you think maybe she’s satisfied?”

“Maybe.” Jodi squeezed her hand. “I think maybe there’s some peace now.”

“Lucy isn’t having that sleep paralysis thing anymore, either. I think it’s connected. Or at least, I’d *like* to think it is.”

They stood for a while. Jodi didn’t know how long you were supposed to visit a grave for. Was there something to do? Or say? Would Paige want to pray?

“I threw the bottle.” The words were whispered from Jodi’s left. Her head snapped to Paige, and if it weren’t for the tears dripping off her eyelashes, she would have thought someone else had said it. “I threw it, and I’m sorry.”

Jodi’s heart hammered. “What?”

“It was me.” Paige looked at her with wet eyes and a pink nose. “It wasn’t funny, but I thought—” She choked, and Jodi couldn’t breathe. “Do you ever feel like you’re not enough?” Paige asked.

There was a warm breeze winding its way between them. Paige’s hair ebbed and flowed.

“I’m so afraid that you guys will find out that I’m nothing. Nobody,” Paige said. Jodi’s eyes were stinging. “I feel like I’m always running to catch up with you guys. I do stupid things to make myself *matter*.” She turned to Emily’s headstone, raising her voice to say, “And it was wrong. It could have really hurt you. And I’m sorry.”

Jodi felt such a mix of horror and sadness, understanding and otherness. “Does Lucy know?”

Paige sniffed. “No. I was driving her car. I’d dropped her off for something.”

The breeze played with their hair, their clothes. Jodi stared at her, trying to understand.

A car door slammed in the parking lot, echoing against the gravestones. Jodi spun. Zack and Lucy were walking toward them. Lucy had a bundle of

daisies in her hand.

“Don’t tell Zack,” Paige said, and then smiled brightly to wave them over.

Jodi was still trying to school her expression when Zack and Lucy reached them. It was the first time the four of them had been together since Zack’s charges were dropped, but it felt weird to be together without Julian. And now that Jodi knew another secret, it felt unbearable.

Lucy enveloped her in a hug the second she was in range, and Jodi felt herself sink into it. Lucy whispered in her ear, “Great idea. Thank you for inviting us.” Jodi’s eyes flickered to Paige while Lucy held her.

Jodi wondered if they blamed her, if they were secretly angry about Julian and wanted answers. She hadn’t really discussed why she’d reached out to Detective Harding, but they’d never asked. But she guessed it didn’t matter. What’s done was done.

Julian was the only one who wasn’t walking away unscathed.

Her eyes landed on Zack. His gaze was open and kind, but there was an edge of worry under it. “Hey, Jo.”

She nodded at him. She wasn’t sure she needed a hug from him. If he wasn’t going to wrap her up like Lucy had, then she wasn’t going to step forward.

Lucy set down the daisies and said something short and sweet. Zack did the same. After a moment, they started talking about the new roommates they’d already connected to. And it was normal. Almost.

Greg had gotten Boston to reinstate Zack’s admission. It wasn’t Zack’s first-choice school, but it was where his sister was, and he’d be on the basketball team. Lucy was in at UCLA, and she and Paige were already talking about meeting up after their first week of classes.

While the two of them talked about Rodeo Drive, Zack leaned into her. “Can we walk?”

Jodi took a deep breath and followed him between the gravestones. Someone had come by and given flowers to every single grave in the row.

“Can I ask you if you’re mad at me?” he said.

She thought about it for a moment. “No. Not really. I told you, I never wanted you to go to jail. But I do have a favor to ask you.” She turned over her shoulder to look at Paige and Lucy, thinking of how many secrets they all kept. “Tell the girls. They deserve to know the truth.”

He rolled words around in his mouth for a moment, trying to get out of it, she assumed.

“It will be hard,” she continued, “but lying to your best friends is the worst thing you can do, Zack.”

He nodded. “I will. Before we all leave.” Turning back toward her, he took a deep breath. “I feel like things between all of us are weird now. You guys will be in SoCal, but I’ll be in Boston. And Julian ... Have you talked to him?”

“I’m going to visit him in August,” she said. He clenched his jaw, and she rolled her eyes. “Relax. You should talk to him. He’s your best friend.”

He cleared his throat. “Do you think maybe I could come visit you at CalArts? Maybe in October? Or I could fly you to Boston?”

His face was open, waiting. “Maybe,” she said. “I think we should try things without each other for a while. That’s what college is all about.”

“I don’t want to lose you as a friend, Jo.” His eyes were a deep blue, begging her.

She nodded and said, “I don’t think of it as a loss. I think of it as ... a chance to find each other again. You’re going to the East Coast, I’m staying here. It’s impossible to stay what we were, so let’s just see what else we can be.”

She looked up at him and saw him frowning. She had the distinct impression that Zack Thrasher hadn’t gotten what he wanted for once in his life. She smiled.

★ ★ ★

## ONE MONTH LATER

Jodi checked in at the desk, handed over her sharp objects, and went through the metal detector. The fluorescents buzzed above her head, and the walls seemed to echo on their own.

The guard led her to a room with the plexiglass windows and two-way phones. A few visitors were already sitting, chatting with their loved ones in orange.

She only waited thirty seconds before the heavy metal door opened behind the glass, and Julian Hollister appeared. His hair was shorn short, and his skin had lost a bit of that Gap ad glimmer, but he was smirking at her.

He dropped into the chair across from her, picked up the phone with a twirl, and said, “Julian Hollister, who’s calling?”

“It’s not fair that you can shave your hair—your career-defining hair—and still look this good.”

“It was never just the hair.” He took her in, his eyes scanning her face, memorizing. “Do you want me to say something about how you look now?”

“No, that would be a little tawdry, since you’re incarcerated.” She folded her free arm on the counter and leaned forward. “Would you like to hear that I’m sorry?”

“Not if you’re not.”

She stared back at him with a soft smile, and he did the same.

“I got my driver’s license,” she offered.

His smile was electric. “Watch out, world. Jodi Dillon is on the streets.”

She rolled her eyes. “I mean, I don’t have a car yet. But now I have more options. And I’m going to school next week,” she said. “CalArts. I’m gonna try to ‘make a career’ out of this whole theater backdrop thing.”

His eyes sparkled. “Good. I might miss the show this semester, but do you think you could save a ticket for me for spring?”

She chuckled, and the guard behind him at the door glared at the two of them. She supposed this was far lighter than most discussions in this room.

They talked for a bit, and she finally asked what she’d been wondering.

“Who was driving the car? When Emily was on the hood?”

He tilted his head at her. “I told you it was me.”

“And I don’t believe you.”

Julian’s lips twitched. “Oh yeah? Who do you think it was?”

Jodi looked him over. “The only person you’d take the fall for. Who we’d all take the fall for.”

He pressed his lips together, a smile bitten back. “Not you though. You wouldn’t have.”

“No. I wouldn’t have. Not if they’d asked me to testify.”

He sighed.

“I wrote to Hannah,” he said, and she blinked. “I don’t know if she read it, but it doesn’t really matter. That’s up to her.”

“What did you say?”

“‘Sorry.’ I meant it, too.”

Jodi nodded. “Do you remember the weird texts we were getting? It was Hannah.” Julian’s brows lifted. “She was really angry and trying to ... I dunno. Maybe make sure Emily wasn’t forgotten?”

He shifted in his chair. “Yeah.”

“A lot of the other weird stuff stopped. Lucy says she doesn’t wake up like she’s being watched anymore. Paige doesn’t either. I used to dream of her—I don’t know if I told you that—but that’s stopped, too.” She took a deep breath. “I guess it might have all been in our heads. Guilt playing with us.”

The guard stepped forward and gestured to Jodi. “Time’s up.”

She nodded, and Julian took her in one last time.

“You’ll be done soon,” she said. “Me, Paige, Zack, and Lucy—we were haunted by this for a year. I know it doesn’t feel the same, and maybe this is dumb—”

“No, I get it,” he said. “This is my turn. I know I made a choice to be cruel. And I have to live with that.”

“I guess I’m saying, I’m glad you weren’t haunted over the past year. That she wasn’t ... playing tricks on your picture gallery, or in your dreams, or sitting on the side of your bed in the morning.” She chuckled.

Julian looked at her, his eyes turning serious and intent. “I never said she wasn’t.”

Jodi stared, shock running over her.

“Hollister, let’s go.” The guard stepped forward.

“You—” Jodi tried to form the words. “The whole time? Or, when you—when you died—?”

“See you, Dillon,” he said. “Don’t forget to write.”

Jodi felt the moment slipping from her. He didn’t wait for her reply. The phone clanged on the receiver with finality, and he pushed back from the chair with a quick smile.

He moved to the back wall and followed the guard to the door. The sconce above him winked.

The door opened, and the second scone surged. Julian gave her a final glance before the door closed, and Jodi watched the scone above him flicker and go out.

## Epilogue

The guard escorts him out the door, and I take one last look at Jodi. I wave.

I move with him to his room, a small box he shares with someone else, but it's vacant now. He clenches his jaw as I sit on the end of his roommate's bed and stare at him. Just like I've done for a year now.

"I told you to thank her for the drawing," I say.

He ignores me. Like he's done for a year now.

He picks up a book and tries to read, so I stare at a spot on his neck until he scratches it. It's my favorite game.

I try to whisper ideas to him. Ways to see her again in a few short months. I know he wants to, but he's vindictive enough to keep himself from her if it will keep *me* from her.

"We should go to CalArts in December," I say. "We can see her play. Think of how happy she'd be if you surprised her—"

The book flies at my head, passing through me.

He folds his hands under his chin, pinching his eyes closed. They snap open and look right at me, glaring, cutting.

I smile back at him. We're just getting started.

# Acknowledgments

This book has my whole heart, and I couldn't have gotten it to this stage without the people listed here.

My agent, Gaia Banks, is the absolute best in the biz. Thank you for being with me every step of the way whenever I say I want to branch out. Thank you to everyone at Sheil Land Associates LTD, especially Lauren Coleman and Natalie Barracliffe.

To my editors Alexandra Sehulster, Tom Bonnick, and Natalie Doherty—thank you for finding this book and championing it. You elevated my material so much, and I can't thank you enough. Wednesday Books and Harper Fire, I am so grateful for the beginnings of a long partnership! Thank you to Ashley Quintana, Cassidy Graham, Jane Tait, Cassie Gutman, Natalie Montanez, Sara Goodman, Eileen Rothschild, Anto Marr, and the entire rest of the team at Wednesday Books and Harper Fire. Thank you, Ollie, for the care you took in the sensitivity read.

To the friends who not only supported me, but also read the early version of *The Thrashers*—Ali Hazelwood, Jen, Mar, Cat, Katie, Lucy, Alannah, Bailey, Toni, Celia Winters, Victoria, and Diana Maltzer. To my group chats that are instrumental to my mental health and well-being—Gremlins, WAH, and Edge Chat—thank you to you all.

Anna Conathan, you may possibly love this book more than I do, and that is actually impossible, so here's to defying the possible. I know I'm your favorite client, thanks. Amanda, you came in at the eleventh hour and not only tidied up my (fictional) legal messes, but also told me that *this is the one*. And Fancy Margaret, you are so fancy that you deserve no lesser

title. Thank you for being the biggest JOLIAN fan in the world and talking to me about this book from a balcony in Italy, randomly.

To the booksellers and bookstagrammers who take the time to push my books and support me, thank you. To the YA writers who agreed to blurb me for my intro to this genre, thank you!

Thank you to my parents for every little thing. And thank you to my readers who have followed me to the ends of the earth, genre to genre. Thank you to the members of Rights and Wrongs and Julie Soto Reader Group for making this whole thing so fun.

Thank you to my Paige and my Lucy and my Oliver for surviving the trenches with me. We all came out with different scars, and this book is mine.

ALSO BY [JULIE SOTO](#)

*Forget Me Not  
Not Another Love Song*

## About the Author



Kevin Fiscus Photography

[JULIE SOTO](#) (she/her) is a *USA Today* bestselling author, playwright, and actress originally from Sacramento, California. Her musical *Generation Me* won the 2017 New York Musical Festival's Best Musical award, as well as Best Book for her script. She is a musical theater geek, fandom nerd, and the author of many spicy fan fictions. Julie now lives in Fort Bragg, California, with her dog, Charlie. She is probably drinking coffee as you read this. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).

**Thank you for buying this  
Wednesday Books ebook.**

To receive special offers, bonus content,  
and info on new releases and other great reads,  
sign up for our newsletters.

**Sign Up**

Or visit us online at  
[us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup](https://us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup)

For email updates on the author, click [here](#).

# Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Notice](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Also by Julie Soto](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright](#)

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. For information, address St. Martin's Publishing Group, 120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271.

[www.wednesdaybooks.com](http://www.wednesdaybooks.com)

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

Cover Design and Hand Lettering By Anto Marr

Cover art: spotlight & wood texture © Lars Hallstrom/Shutterstock; journal © Fabio Alcini/Shutterstock; E, M sticker © Susse\_n/ Shutterstock; water droplets © PrasongTakham/Shutterstock; blood splatter © Yeti studio/Shutterstock; puddles of water © Krisamorn/Shutterstock; heart bookmark © ERphotographer/iStockphoto

eISBN 9781250377180

The publisher of this book does not authorize the use or reproduction of any part of this book in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. The publisher of this book expressly reserves this book from the Text and Data Mining exception in accordance with Article 4(3) of the European Union Digital Single Market Directive 2019/790.

Our ebooks may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at 1-800-221-7945, extension 5442, or by email at [MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com](mailto:MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com).

First Edition: 2025



*Your gateway to knowledge and culture. Accessible for everyone.*



[z-library.sk](http://z-library.sk)

[z-lib.gs](http://z-lib.gs)

[z-lib.fm](http://z-lib.fm)

[go-to-library.sk](http://go-to-library.sk)



[Official Telegram channel](#)



[Z-Access](#)



<https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Z-Library>