

LBRIS

We know
books

THE
THRASHERS

JULIE SOTO

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HARPER FIRE

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 in 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'd hopped on 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-storey 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 realising the car was *swaying*, the windows fogged with the activity of whatever was going on inside. She jumped back, apologised 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-blonde 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 towards 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 materialised, 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 round 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, her lips curved downwards.

'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.

A familiar voice blared out from the karaoke speakers. 'Wanna dedicate this song to Jodi Dillon. "Hey Ya!" is her favourite song of all time.'

She peered round the kitchen corner, and glared at the handsome

boy with the microphone who was 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 over to her, drawing a crowd, and at least she got the pleasure of watching the bikini girl's eyes nearly pop out of her head as Zack Thrasher's attention rested solely on Jodi.

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

At the bridge to 'Hey Ya!', Matt was the loudest person to yell, 'Ice cold!' and, when Zack asked for the 'ladies', he shoved the mic into Jodi's face.

She responded drily, 'Yeah?'

Zack buckled over laughing and passed the microphone 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 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 off 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, she knew Julian was gearing up to ruin her night.

'Too good for tap water, Dillon?'

She glowered up at 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 humour. But Julian was rough around the edges. He cheated on tests, he cheated on girls and he didn't apologise for anything. He was disgustingly attractive, Jodi knew, and apart 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 towards 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.

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 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 then everyone was in love with Zack Thrasher.

The only thing she wished Zack was better at? Not splitting his time and attention in a thousand 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 Jodi 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,' he asked. Jodi got the impression he still hadn't realised she didn't go to school with him, but Matt ploughed on without waiting for 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 towards her – shoeless. 'There you are, babe.'

She was abruptly engulfed in Fantasy perfume and luscious blonde 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 of 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 Number 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 at times 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.