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THE LAST CONFESSION OF AUTUMN CASTERLY

Also by Meredith Tate

Freedom Trials

Missing Pieces

The Red Labyrinth

THE LAST CONFESSION OF AUTUMN CASTERLY MEREDITH TATE

putnam

G. P. Putnam's Sons

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

To my parents—Paul and Jessica
And to my husband, Vincent

To my beautiful hometown of Concord, NH

And especially,
To all the survivors who are
shut down
gaslighted
silenced
slut-shamed
blamed
and called liars,
I see you. I believe you.
You deserve the world.
This one's for you.

THURSDAY

A U T U M N

On a scale of one to ten, my desire to talk to the cops who've spent the last twenty minutes digging through my locker is a raging negative fifty. And yet, here I am.

I breathe out a heavy sigh, watching them examine every single book, binder, and random thing in there.

The shorter cop holds up a baggie full of nuts. "What's this?"

"Honey-roasted peanuts. Very scary stuff." If I had known I'd be yanked out of fifth period, I wouldn't have blown two hours of my life writing that Faulkner paper last night. But everyone thinks their time is more valuable than mine—it comes with the territory of being a teenage girl.

"What's this dusting on them?"

I lean against the row of lockers behind me. "The honey-roasted part." If they were coated in cocaine, does he really think I'd look him in the eyes and say, *They're coated in cocaine?* "Otherwise I would've just said 'peanuts.'"

This is Kaitlyn Kennedy's fault. Each second I stand here, the anger inside me simmers hotter. It's pretty much at a full-blown boil right now. Kaitlyn's lucky she's not here. She won't be so lucky later.

I survey the pile of my crap they've dumped onto the common-room floor. "Can I go back to class now?"

“We’re almost done.” The other cop, who looks like a less-hot clone of Rob Gronkowski, yanks the spare box of tampons out of my backpack. To my horror, he opens it. He literally opens my tampons and starts taking them out, one by one, right in the middle of the common room.

“Seriously?”

“We’re just doing our job, Ms. Casterly.” The short cop pulls out one of the tampons and sniffs it, and I pretty much want to melt into the carpet. What the hell? If they’re going to sniff my stuff for drugs, at least bring a drug-sniffing dog for me to pet.

Principal Greenwich hovers nearby, his caterpillar eyebrows low over his eyes. “Autumn, why is it that whenever there’s a hint of trouble in this school, all roads seem to lead back to you?”

“I didn’t do anything, Mr. Greenwich. There’s nothing in my locker but books and trash. And tampons.” I’m not lying. I’d never keep my stash in my locker for this very reason.

But it doesn’t matter if they find anything or not. The principal has already pegged me as a criminal. I’m one of the “bad kids,” and labels come with assumptions. They assume the bad kids are always monsters, and the good ones never are.

A couple of doe-eyed freshmen whisper to each other as they pass, not even trying to hide their stares. Probably excited to tell their friends they witnessed Autumn Casterly getting her ass handed to her by the cops. One of them looks like she might try and talk to me, but I glower and they walk faster.

“You’re probably one of the only senior girls whose locker isn’t loaded with selfies and pictures of giant groups of girls making duckfaces.” The cop chuckles, thrilled by his own joke. Ah yes, we’ve got a real comedian here. Nothing is funnier than belittling teen girls. But I can’t help feeling like there was a hidden question

in his statement—*Don't you have any friends?* I grind my shoe into the dirty carpet.

Not-Rob-Gronkowski grins, holding up a photo of my dog, Pumpernickel. “Who’s this?”

Literally none of your business. “My dog.”

“He a miniature schnauzer?”

“Yep.”

“Cute. My sister has one, they’re great.”

Five minutes ago he made fun of my PROUD VEGETARIAN magnet, so I’m pretty pissed he thinks he has the right to compliment my dog right now. I can almost see the amusement on his face that the school delinquent has a well-loved pet. As if the fact that I deal pills means I should be surrounded by vape pens and switchblades and maybe something *really* illegal, like a mountain of Kinder Eggs. But I love my dog. Loving animals is so much less complicated than loving humans.

“Aw. This you?” He holds up another photo, crinkled at the edges. It’s my mom and me sitting on the tire swing at Merrill Park when I was six. Back when we lived on the east side of town.

Something catches in my throat. My mom’s been dead for almost seven years, and I thought I’d be able to handle these things better by now. Everyone told me it would get easier—five stages of grief and all that stuff—but it hasn’t yet.

I look away. “Yep.”

The cops finish their prying and declare my locker officially drug-free. They don’t offer to help put back my stuff they’ve so generously left strewn in the middle of the room. I force a smile as they leave, mentally shoving both middle fingers up their asses. The funny thing is, if they searched my bedroom, they’d have enough evidence to lock me away for a couple of years. I suppose

that's what would happen if the system actually worked.

"Thanks for your cooperation, Autumn." The principal says it like I had a choice. He nods as I start shoving books into my locker. "You can go back to class when you've finished up." No apology for ruining my day, of course.

I throw my things inside a little harder than necessary, the metal clanging in my ears. My face gets hot when the bell rings and a flood of people burst into the common room.

They send smiles and waves my way. Everyone wants to say they're Autumn Casterly's BFF. But none of them give two shits about me—they just want me to sell to them.

The moment they think I'm out of earshot, words get tossed between them in hushed whispers. *Bitch. Slut. Liar.* They'd never say it to my face, but my hearing is good. Too good. I stuff everything into my locker faster.

Maybe if I was weaker, their words would pierce me. My mom used to say that we should be like ducks, letting gossip and insults flow off our backs like drops of water rolling down oily feathers. But I'm not a duck.

I'm a predator.

With each book and binder that I cram back into my locker, I repeat one promise in my head over and over: Kaitlyn Kennedy's getting her ass kicked after school.

I V Y

Kevin is taking forever to make his move. His leg jitters against the chair leg beside me. Our Ticket to Ride Europe game board takes up half the table. Every time his knee jiggles, it knocks some of the train pieces off their spaces.

“Hey, Marino, you planning to draw cards this year?” Alexa asks.

A pink tinge spreads across Kevin’s cheeks. “I’m thinking.”

Alexa’s long, glittery fingernails click impatiently against the tabletop.

We started the Nerd Herd Club last year, trying to make it a thing. It’s still just the six of us. Our meetings usually start with someone geeking out over Final Fantasy and end with an argument about *Star Wars* (Han shot first, I don’t give a shit what Jason says). We’ve recently delved into the wonderful world of board games—which is why we’re meeting in the gross cafeteria today, because the librarian accused us of being too rowdy. I mean, I wouldn’t call us *rowdy*; I’d say we have a spirited sense of competition.

“Okay, I’m gonna build,” Kevin says after an eternity.

“Finally,” Jason mutters.

Kevin lays four blue train pieces onto the board, connecting Edinburgh and London.

“Asshole!” Alexa fake-punches him in the arm. “I was gonna do that.”

The janitor swishes a dirty mop over the tiled floor. He looks less than thrilled to see us here after school.

I nudge Kevin. "Let's meet at your place tomorrow. I feel like we've outworn our welcome in the cafeteria."

"My mom's renovating our kitchen."

"Better than this." Alexa flicks a lock of purple hair behind her ear.

"She says no visitors until it's finished."

Alexa's girlfriend, Sophie, finishes polishing her glasses and pushes them up the bridge of her nose. "Isn't there a rule that school clubs have to meet at school to count?"

Jason lays a few tracks on the board. "I don't think hanging out every day counts as a club anymore."

"It's a stupid rule anyway." Alexa rolls her eyes at him. "Seriously? I was *just* about to build there."

"Can we go to your house?" I ask Alexa.

"Nope. My parents haven't seen this one since we officially started dating." She affectionately nudges Sophie. "And I'd rather avoid the third degree. You know my dad would have the 'what are your intentions with my daughter' talk with her."

I snort. "Oh please. You're the one doing all the corrupting in this relationship."

"It's true." Sophie grins. "But you have to let them see me before homecoming."

"You going to homecoming, Ivy?" Jason asks. "You should go with me. As friends. So we don't look like losers."

"I think it's too late for that," I say. "But sure." I'm a little relieved. Me and Jason have been going to dances as best-friend dates since freshman year, and I always worry he's going to get a girlfriend and ditch me. Then I'll be that person hanging out by the bathroom during slow songs.

Alexa huffs. “What if she’d wanted to go with a real date?”

My heart sinks. “He is a real date. Friends count.” I draw two, doing a happy dance at the wild card. “Unless Patrick Perkins wants to move back to Concord and sweep me off my feet.”

Jason laughs. “Your lover.”

Patrick Perkins has been an inside joke ever since I told the group about him. I was so smitten with that kid back in fifth grade. We were besties. Seriously, he snuck two pints of Ben and Jerry’s out of his parents’ freezer for me the day I got my first period and wanted to die. That kid was the shit. Then his parents got a divorce and he moved away. It sucked. But now it’s kind of funny.

A couple upperclassmen stroll through the cafeteria in workout clothes, making a beeline for the snack machine. “Wassup, dungeon masters?” one of the guys yells. They practically fall over themselves laughing. I don’t really get what’s so funny; we’re playing board games, ha-ha?

Kevin slinks down in his seat, his cheeks turning pink again. He’s not great with standing up for himself when jerks show up. The rest of us protectively slide closer to him.

“We’re not playing D and D today,” Alexa says coolly. “But I’ll let you know next time we do. We’ve been looking for someone to play the troll.”

“You can be *my* dungeon master,” the other guy says, popping quarters into the machine.

I’ll never understand why douchebags always hit on Alexa. First of all, she’s been dating Sophie for, like, five months now, and they’re always holding hands and stuff in the hallway. Second, she’s got a big *“I like my coffee like I like my men. I don’t drink coffee.”*—Ellen DeGeneres button on her messenger bag. And lastly, she’s deathly allergic to assholes.

“Great! Here’s my dungeon key.” She sticks up her middle finger. “Get your snacks and go away.”

“This machine’s been ransacked. You sure your friend didn’t eat them all?” The way the guy says *friend* is ambiguous, but I know he’s talking about me.

“Hey.” Jason jumps to his feet. Sophie puts her hand on his elbow to calm him down.

“Wow, food jokes about the fat girl,” I shout as they stride out of the cafeteria. “How original.” Seriously, every time someone makes a crack about my weight, they think they’re saying something revolutionary. As if I had no idea I was fat until they pointed it out.

“Sorry, Ivy.” Jason settles back into his seat. “Those guys are pricks.”

“The tall one sits behind me in chem,” Alexa adds. “Judging by his score on our last quiz, methinks he should spend less time being a dick and more time actually, you know, opening a book.”

I grin. “A radical concept. What were we talking about before that rude interruption?”

“Where to meet tomorrow.” Kevin blinks at his train tracks, which are spread victoriously across the entire map of Europe on the game board. “Also, I just completed my long route.”

The rest of us groan. Half the time I think Kevin is hustling us, because he acts so innocent but then kicks our asses at almost every game.

“Total annihilation,” Jason says.

“What about your place, Ivy?” Sophie asks. “Can we meet there?”

I shudder. “Nope. Never. I live with Satan.”

Jason snickers.

“Is your sister really that bad?” Sophie asks. “I don’t think I’ve ever actually met the infamous Autumn Casterly.”

“You’re lucky. She should probably be in juvie,” I mumble. Last

year, I found this pamphlet on how to protect yourself from a snarling dog threatening to bite. You're supposed to avoid eye contact, back away slowly, and speak in a calm tone when absolutely necessary; that's kind of what living with Autumn is like.

"I wouldn't mind hanging out with your sister." Jason winks, laying down a couple tracks.

"Jason Daly-Cruz, do you have the hots for Autumn?" Alexa wiggles her eyebrows.

Jason grins. He thinks it's hilarious to joke about dating Autumn.

"No." I draw a card. "No chance in hell." Kinda sucks when your sister is the pretty one and you have to listen to everyone talk about her constantly. I wouldn't be surprised if Jason did have a crush on Autumn. If not, he's probably the only hetero guy in our whole school who doesn't. Rumor has it she only goes out with college guys, though, and rumors are about as close as I get to actual details about her life.

Deciphering Autumn's rumor mill is like playing two truths and a lie, but in this version of the game, there could be one truth, or two, or three, or zero, and I'd never know which. In the past week, I've heard that Autumn (1) blew off AP Euro to smoke weed in the teachers' lot, (2) was responsible for Carly Quince's ankle brace, and (3) sold painkillers to one of the school secretaries. All I know is, she vanishes constantly, and I don't even want to know whose bed she's sleeping in when she doesn't come home.

With her reputation, I wouldn't think guys would fall at her feet like they do, but Autumn's beauty is like the rush of the ocean in a hurricane. From far away, she's mystifying and beautiful, like waves crashing on a stormy shore. However, the closer you get, the wilder and more dangerous she becomes, capable of pulling you under until you drown.

“Not meeting at my house, and you’re not getting near my sister,” I tell Jason. Basically, Autumn would eat him alive, spit out his bones, and pick her teeth with them. Some of these board games require six people, so I need him to not be human floss.

“Okay, I have to ask.” Alexa leans toward me, lowering her voice to a whisper only we can hear. “Did you ever get confirmation if that rumor about her is true?”

“You’re going to have to be more specific.”

“About, you know.” She smiles deviously. “Her and your step-brother?”

Jason and Kevin huddle closer to me to hear. Ugh. I thought everyone would have dropped this by now. That dirty little secret people felt the need to constantly ask me about back in seventh grade. My friends thought it was *hysterical* at the time.

“What, that she slept with Chris? I guess.” I shrug. “I don’t keep tabs on what or who she’s doing.” I mean, it’s not really a secret around here. I was only in middle school at the time, but it got through the grapevine pretty quickly, and everything at home got super uncomfortable afterward, so I’m guessing it’s true. It kind of skeeves me out. She couldn’t have picked anyone else?

Time for a subject change.

“Jason, how about we go to your place for the next meeting?” I ask. “I haven’t hugged your mom in, like, a week.” Jason’s house is really cool. They have a game room with a foosball table.

“I think you like my parents more than you like me.”

“That’s accurate. But it doesn’t answer my question.”

He thinks for a moment. “Maybe. My brother might have people coming over tomorrow, though. I have to check.” The funny thing about Jason and his brother is, in photos they look nothing alike; Micah is a clone of their blond Irish father, while Jason’s the spit-

ting image of their dark-haired Filipino mother. But when Jason and Micah are standing side by side, the resemblance is uncanny. They could pass as fraternal twins, even though they're five years apart.

Sophie takes her turn, drawing two cards. "We can go to my place."

"Sold!" I slap down my train tracks, accidentally knocking a few pieces off the board. Last time we met at Sophie's place, her dad made us say grace before eating our Taco Bell takeout. But Sophie's house is always full of these awesome strawberry cookies from her grandparents in Seoul, and it's way better than camping out in the cafeteria after hours.

"Hello, everyone." Coach Crespo strolls through the cafeteria, giving us a jolly wave. A whistle hangs from a lanyard around his neck. It bounces against his crimson Concord Football windbreaker with every step.

Jason and Sophie snicker.

"Hey, Coach." Alexa smirks. "What're you up to?"

"On my way to a meeting with Ms. Bratten."

"I'm sure you are," Sophie mutters under her breath. Jason snorts.

"Gotta get the field hockey team in fighting shape this year."

Jason buries his face in his elbow, half a second away from bursting, while Kevin and Alexa are grinning like six-year-olds on Christmas morning. In other news, I'd like to submit an application for some less embarrassing friends.

"You kids enjoy your game." Coach Crespo heads into the hallway, his footsteps fading into nothing.

The table erupts in laughter.

I shake my head. "Could you guys be any more obvious?"

"Creepo's on the prowl," Jason says. "Hide your daughters."

Alexa snorts. “More like hide your mothers.”

Coach Crespo—more commonly known as Coach Creepo—has quite the reputation. And I’m not just referring to the line of trophies outside the gym. Apparently the female coaches will only go into his office in pairs. And back in March, someone left an anonymous note under the principal’s door, swearing Creepo was peeping on girls in the workout room, but nothing came of it. Last year, someone Photoshopped his yearbook pic into a meme that said variations of *Who wants to see my bat?* It made the rounds on Tumblr for three months. He was my stepbrother’s coach back in the day, and he was creepy then, too.

It’s pretty messed up, and I don’t think it’s funny. I want to tell them to stop laughing about it. I open my mouth, but my jaw just kind of hangs open.

There’s a big part at the end of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* where Dumbledore gives Neville points to Gryffindor for standing up to his friends because it’s just as hard as standing up to his enemies. I like to think I’m more of a Ginny than a Neville, but I felt that scene so hard.

I take a deep breath. “Hey, guys?” I peep, barely louder than a whisper.

“Your turn, Ivy,” Jason says, having not heard me.

I close my mouth and draw a card. I would not get points for Hufflepuff today.

“Where the hell is Ahmed?” Alexa checks her phone. “He’s my ride home, and he’s missed the whole game.” She barely finishes her sentence before our sixth member strolls into the cafeteria. “Jeez, he’s like the Babadook—you say his name, and *poof!* He appears.”

“Ha-ha. You’re *bilarious*.” Ahmed groans when he sees our game board. “Ticket to Ride again?”

“Well, if you’d been on time, you could’ve had a say in what we picked,” Alexa says. “But alas.”

“We’re almost done anyway,” I say. “Kevin’s kicking our asses.”

Ahmed sets his backpack on the floor and takes a seat beside Sophie. “I wasn’t trying to be late. I was showing this new kid how to put money on his ID card. I actually invited him to join us, if that’s okay.”

“It’s not a seven-person game,” Jason says. He’s always so over-protective of our little club.

I take a swig from my bottle of Cherry Coke. “It’s fine. The more the merrier.”

“He’ll fit right in, I promise—he’s got a BB-8 backpack.”

“Sweet,” I say.

“One of us, one of us,” Alexa chants.

Ahmed waves. “Here he is!”

I look up right as the newcomer walks in and nearly choke on my drink.

“Whoa.” The guy grins and runs a hand through his light hair. “Hey, Ivy. Long time no see.”

There, standing right in front of me, is a several-years-older Patrick Perkins.

AUTUMN

I lean against the locker room door, sliding on my rings—two on each finger. Field hockey practice ended a while ago, and players are slowly trickling out, their hair cemented to their foreheads with sweat.

No one snitches on me.

Scratch that. Some people do. But no one snitches on me twice.

A criminal record would ruin everything. Not even the worst college wants a drug dealer, no matter how good their SAT scores are. Last year, I found out Amanda Carlson told our pre-calc substitute that I had pot in my backpack. The sub didn't do anything—I'm 90 percent sure he was high himself—but it scared the shit out of me; if anyone had checked my bag, they would've learned Amanda was telling the truth, and I would've been suspended. It was a good lesson for me and Amanda, though. I haven't carried drugs to school since, and Amanda's brand-new Hyundai got an introduction to my house key.

"You sure she's still in there?" Jaclyn asks. She's wearing bright red lipstick today, which is too severe against her pale skin and platinum-blond hair.

"She's there." I throw on a coat of gloss and smack my lips together. "She always showers after every practice." Before Kaitlyn, I don't think anyone used those nasty gym showers since, like, the

eighties. “But she won’t do it when her team’s still around. I know Kaitlyn—she won’t even change in the same room as them.” Back in the day, when everyone went to sleepovers together, the rest of us put on our pj’s in the main room, but Kaitlyn would go into the bathroom and shut the door. You never know when tidbits like that will come in handy.

Abby lazily flicks her lighter, watching the flame burst up and shrink back down. “How do you know it was *her*, though? It could’ve been—”

She stops abruptly as another field hockey player saunters out of the locker room. The poor girl’s eyes widen when she sees us. She’s short and scrawny, probably a freshman, but everyone knows who I am. Hell, even kids at the community college know who I am—maybe even at the middle school, too. I can see conflict crossing the freshman’s face. Should she be a hero and warn Kaitlyn? Or get the hell out of here while she still can? I arch a brow, inviting a challenge. The girl scurries away, her eyes glued to the floor.

I continue. “Cops were at my locker with Principal Greenwich.” Three hours later, I’m still pissed about it.

Abby snorts. “So? You don’t keep your shit there. Anyone could’ve tipped them off.”

“My *locker*, Abby.” I roll my eyes. “If it was Sarah Solomon, the cops would’ve been at my car. If it was Derek, they’d be checking my cubby in the bio lab. But they were at my locker, and that has Kaitlyn’s paw prints all over it.” The best way to learn who you can trust? Plant some fake seeds. See which ones sprout.

“Let’s make this quick,” Abby says. “I don’t wanna be late to meet the guys.”

“They can wait.” It’s a stretch; our supplier and his guys will

probably get bored and leave if we don't show up on time. But this needs to be done first.

A sophomore strolls past—I don't remember her name. I think she's on cheer squad or something. Her eyes light up when she sees me. "Hey, Autumn!"

I nod, not bothering to wipe the bored look off my face.

"You going to the football game against Central next weekend?" She's grinning so wide, it's like she's storing acorns for winter.

"Nope." I hate football. "Not my thing. Sorry."

Her face falls. "Oh." The girl hovers a moment, shuffling her feet.

I pretend to check my phone, hoping she'll leave.

That's a funny thing about being popular; everyone wants to say they know you, even tangentially. I can picture this sophomore expecting me to say I was going to the game like everyone else. Then at the game she'd tell all her friends that I told her I'd be there, like we're friends or something. Last year, this super-annoying girl, Lily Howell, loaned me a pen in physics when mine ran out of ink; after class, I overheard her telling her friends that she didn't have an extra pen because she *loaned it to Autumn Casterly*.

They taught us the trickle-down theory in economics. Our teacher drew a tree on the board, each branch with a bird on it. As the bird on the top got the most fruit, it started dropping fruit for the birds on the lower branches, and the birds on the bottom got the least. This kid Brad, who is always a giant shit to everyone, said, "So the bird at the top poops, and it lands on the heads of the little birds below it?" He was being a smartass, but he had a point. I don't want to be the bird with shit on my head. I want to be on the top branch, deciding who gets the fruit.

"So I'll see you guys later?" the girl says.

I position my body slightly to the right, facing Abby and Jaclyn

with my back to the girl. She gets the message and keeps walking.

When her footsteps fade, I press my ear to the door. The rushing shower water mingles with Kaitlyn's muffled singing voice. She thinks she's alone. This will be good.

Holding my finger to my lips, I slink through the locker room door. Jaclyn and Abby follow, their footsteps not as stealthy as mine. Steam clouds the room, hot and foggy against the mirrors. A pair of jeans and a button-down shirt are neatly folded on the bench, waiting for Kaitlyn to get out of the shower.

Abby gently pushes them to the floor. "Oops."

Jaclyn snickers into her hand. They're loving this.

I take a moment to adjust the tiny silver hoops in my ears in the bathroom mirror. It crosses my mind to remove them in case things get physical, but I don't. They look cute on me. Besides, I'm the one with the upper hand here.

A balled-up sock lies abandoned on the floor. I kick it into the corner and approach the showers.

The water cuts off with a squeak.

Kaitlyn slides the shower curtain open, a towel wrapped around her body. She sucks in a sharp breath, nearly stumbling over herself when she sees us.

I grin. "Hey there."

She tries to run, but Abby and Jaclyn have already grabbed her arms and pinned her to the wall. Kaitlyn's practically got muscles growing on her muscles, but my girls are tougher. A scream rockets from her mouth.

Oh, for fuck's sake.

My girls grit their teeth but don't relinquish their grip on Kaitlyn's arms.

"Would you shut the hell up?" Jaclyn snaps.

The scream echoes around the hot room. No one will hear her unless they're creeping around the basement after hours, but I don't take chances. I pluck the dirty sock off the floor and cram it into Kaitlyn's mouth.

I step back and smile. "There. Much better."

Abby smirks. "You're awfully quiet now. Too bad you couldn't have kept that mouth shut around the cops, huh?"

Fear flashes across Kaitlyn's face. She makes muffled sounds behind the gag, like a sick animal or something. Probably begging. Why do they always beg? If you need to beg for mercy, it's too late—mercy's not coming.

Kaitlyn's panicked eyes flick between me and the girls pinning her. But karma's a bitch, and I've got no sympathy for snitches.

"You know, I liked you, Kaitlyn." I step closer to her. "Trusted you. Considered you a valuable customer, like I value all my customers."

She blinks back tears, mumbling something that sounds suspiciously like *Please, Autumn*.

I wag my finger at her. "I'd have thought the captain of our varsity field hockey team—seventeenth in the nation, am I right?—would have more stones than this. Woman up, please. You're making yourself look bad."

Jaclyn and Abby cackle.

"Now, what should I do with you?" I tap my chin, pretending to ponder. "Would suck to play the championships next month with a broken arm, huh?"

She whimpers.

"Nah." I shake my head. "I've got school pride. Can't let you get your asses kicked by Central . . . *again*."

I really should win an Oscar for dragging this out so much.

“Now, if you can promise to stay quiet—not that anyone’s coming to save you, anyway—I’ll take this out.” I lazily point at the gag in her mouth.

Kaitlyn nods enthusiastically and I remove the wet sock, tossing the gross thing far away.

“I’m a forgiving person.” I anchor a hand on my hip. “But you ratted me out. That’s not cool.”

“Not even a little bit,” Jaclyn adds. She’s got several inches on Kaitlyn.

“I didn’t tell the cops anything!”

I tsk at her. “Kaitlyn, Kaitlyn. You know I know when you’re lying, right?”

“I swear it wasn’t me. I wouldn’t tell the police—why would I?”

“Then you told someone who *did* tell the cops. You’re not supposed to tell *anyone* about me, no matter what.”

She blinks. “Don’t you want new customers?”

“I have plenty of customers. You know my rules. If you want to refer someone, you give me their name and *I’ll* get in touch with *them* if I trust them. You don’t just go waving my name around like a fucking flag.” I swear, information leaks through this school faster than a damn sieve. “Because shit like that is why the police spent an hour searching my locker today.”

“I didn’t mean to.” Kaitlyn’s voice shakes. “I swear. Someone asked me where to get Ativan, and I told them to talk to you—that you keep a stash in your locker. I didn’t know she’d tell.”

“Oh? And who would this *someone* be?”

She hesitates.

I sigh. “Guess she wants to rock a cast for a while.”

“No! No. Okay. It was Hailey Waters.”

I’m taken aback. Hailey’s literally the last person I’d expect to

be sniffing around for pills. That girl is like a walking billboard for the Catholic Church. I've never even spoken to her, and for good reason. Still, no one's perfect, and Little Miss Hailey probably has dirt like anyone else. If I find out she's the reason those cops were sniffing my tampons, that dirt might accidentally find its way onto the morning announcements.

Abby laughs. "No way."

"I swear. She must have told someone."

"I'm not surprised," Jaclyn says. "I'd get high too if I had to be in marching band." She nods at me. "Doesn't your sister play an instrument? Bet she knows Hailey."

I think for a moment. My useless sister, Ivy, could come in handy for once. Between her and the merry band of losers she hangs out with, someone's got to know Hailey well enough to have insider information. But it seems risky dragging her into this. She'd tell our dad in half a second.

"No. I'll find out on my own." I always do. Another valuable lesson my mom taught me before she died: Don't depend on anyone but yourself. "As for this one . . ." I nod at Kaitlyn, who cringes. My friends tighten their grip on her arms.

"I told you what you wanted!"

"Yes, you did." I twist the heavy rings on my fingers. "But it's not enough." I swing my fist like I'm about to punch her, but stop an inch short of breaking her nose; she winces and closes her eyes. Fake-outs are very effective—they spread fear without leaving marks. I lower my voice to a whisper and get right up next to her ear. "Don't mess up again."

On cue, Jaclyn and Abby rip the towel off her. Before she can cover up, I've already snapped a photo. I flip my phone around so Kaitlyn can see a clear shot of her tits. "If you do, not only

am I going to break your face, but this picture is gonna make the rounds all over Twitter. Reddit. My entire email address book. Every number in my phone. Instagram, until they flag it. The bulletin board in Panera.” I count off the locations on my fingers. “Your church on Green Street.”

I learned this tactic last year. This girl Kasey Muller was talking shit behind my back, so we snuck a photo of her drinking beer at a party. Her parents are super strict and would’ve grounded her forever if they knew she drank. I told Kasey I’d make sure her parents saw the picture if she didn’t cut it out. Never had trouble from her again, and then her family moved to Maine. Oh well.

My girls shove Kaitlyn away. When no one’s looking, I covertly delete the photo. I’m a bitch, but I’m not a monster.

She throws her clothes on, her face flushed pink, and practically bowls through us to get to the door. Her shirt buttons aren’t even and I’m pretty sure her fly is only half zipped. That’s good—it means she’s more afraid of me than of being seen half undressed at school. Jaclyn and Abby laugh.

A pang of guilt thrums to life inside me, but I swat it away. I know this looks bad, but Kaitlyn had it coming. They always do. It’s not like I actually *want* to hurt anyone or take joy in it or something. But if I get caught dealing, they’ll throw me in prison and I can’t let that happen.

“Pleasure doing business with you, Kait.” I smile. “See you around.”

Kaitlyn pauses, one foot out the door, like she’s contemplating whether getting in the last word is worth being in deeper shit with my girls and me. She takes a breath, her eyes burning with hatred. “This’ll come back to bite you one day, Autumn Casterly. Someday you won’t have your minions with you and you’ll be all alone.

Meredith Tate

You just wait. You'll never see it coming, and then you'll be sorry."

"Kait. Honey. Two things to know about me." I hold up my index finger. "One, I don't give two shits about your threats. And two?" I raise another finger. "I'm never sorry."

Jaclyn and Abby's laughter drowns out whatever Kaitlyn says next. But from the way her lips move, I catch it anyway, the moment before she plows out the door.

"You will be."

A U T U M N

I drop Jaclyn and Abby at Dunkin' to get us fuel while I stop at home for cash. There are too many Kaitlyn Kennedys at school to risk leaving money lying around there.

I pull into Dad's ugly cracked driveway and climb out. My ancient Civic reeks of pot. I used to Febreze it after every ride so Dad wouldn't get suspicious, but I stopped caring last year. If he doesn't give a shit, why should I?

I grab the wad of mail stuffed into our metal mailbox. The screen door slams behind me with a reverberating crash. Pumpernickel runs over to me, his claws clicking against the tile. I don't know if dogs can smile, but I swear, he always looks like he has the biggest grin on his face every time I come home. It's the only reason I come home, to be honest.

I scratch his ears, keeping my back to the wall. "Hey, boy. You have a good day?"

He wiggles in response. A hint of a smile twitches on my face.

It quickly vanishes.

A *Maury* rerun blares from the TV, and the scent of cigarette smoke permeates the room. Growling snores rip from the couch. Kathy's feet dangle off the armrest, sporting chipped pink nail polish. Our musty old afghan is wrapped around her like a cocoon. My mouth tightens.

“Kathy!” I slap the back of the sofa. “Get up.”

My stepmother startles awake so suddenly, she nearly knocks over the mug she’d left balancing between the cushions. “Oh. Sorry. Hi, Autumn.”

“Were you smoking in here?”

I already know the answer; wisps of smoke curl from a fresh butt in the ashtray on the coffee table. I *bate* the smell of cigarette smoke. Maybe Dad and Ivy let her get away with this shit, but not me. If she had lit the house on fire and killed Pumpernickel, I would have murdered her.

“I just needed one.”

“You fell asleep with a lit cigarette in the ashtray.” I slap the pile of mail onto the coffee table. “Go outside if you have to do that.”

“It’s not always easy to go outside, honey. It’s very cold out there now.”

“Well, here’s an easy solution: move out.” The wooden crucifix hanging on the wall glares down at us. If Jesus is real, he’s totally judging me. I’m going straight to hell for this, but I can’t even make myself care. And Dad is nowhere to be found—big surprise.

“I know you smoke in your bedroom, Autumn. And I know it’s not tobacco.”

“You wanna know the difference?” I slam my finger on the TV power button, right before a paternity-test reveal that Kathy will now never see. “This is *my* father’s house. You’re a freeloader. No pay, no say.” It’s not entirely true. Kathy got some money six years ago, before we met her, when her father died and left her eighty-five thousand dollars. She’s milked that money as long as humanly possible, and still forks over a couple hundred bucks a month for rent and stuff. But it’s not enough to make me care. I grab a can of seltzer off the counter and stomp upstairs.

I slam my bedroom door and lean against it. I hate this—I hate her. Every time I see her, it's like a demon takes over my body, flooding me with rage. Sometimes I worry I'll freak out and punch her.

Punching Kathy doesn't scare me. What scares me is, I don't know if I'd be able to stop.

I press my hands to my forehead, fighting back the urge to scream. Through my half-closed eyes, I can make out the tattoo scrawled across my left wrist. *It goes on*, says the brushy black script, from a Robert Frost quote: "In three words, I can sum up everything I've learned about life. It goes on." The tattoo does its job; it calms me down. I take a deep breath.

Something in the hall jingles, and I open the door. Pumpernickel takes a seat in my doorway, looking up at me in silent question.

"I'm okay, buddy." I scoop him up and carry him to my bed. It's not actually a bed—it's an air mattress covered in sheets. We're not too poor for beds or anything. I just sleep better on a plain old air mattress, when I sleep here at all. I threw out my old bed when we moved, along with most of my other junk.

My bedroom looks like it belongs to a fifteen-year-old goth boy. That's because it probably did. When we moved into this shithole, I didn't do a damn thing to the existing room. Some little emo jackass wanted to paint the walls gray and obscure the broken blinds with black curtains? Fine. Chunks of gray paint are chipped off at four corner points, as if the person ripped their posters off the wall in a fit of rage and didn't bother fixing the damage. Dad told me to cover them with my own posters, but I didn't care enough.

I keep a wad of cash and a stash of pills in the bottom of a tampon box in my closet. Ironical, I know. But it's the best hiding place. Dad will never look there, Kathy doesn't give a shit, and Ivy knows I'll kill her if she comes into my room.

I take the fifty I earned at school today out of my back pocket and add it to my existing cash wad. \$7,052 total. It'd be a lot more if I didn't owe Liam a giant cut after every sale or have to split my share with Abby and Jac. I also do one of those monthly sponsor-a-panda things, which I probably shouldn't spend cash on when I'm trying to save, but they're pandas, and they're endangered, and they send me a free calendar every December. Still, I'm nearing \$10K. It's good money, but not enough. I'll need to pay college tuition, and for textbooks, and rent, and whatever it costs to move out of state. When graduation rolls around, I'll get the hell out of here forever. Eight months to go.

Sometimes the way people at school talk about college makes me mad. Oh, your mommy and daddy are paying, no loans required? How nice that must be for you. Meanwhile, my "mommy" is dead and my "daddy" can barely afford his own living expenses, let alone mine when I move out. So if selling pills gets me out of this house, then I don't give a shit.

Under my pillow I find the buck knife I stole from Target last year. I slide it into the front pocket of my black hoodie. The guys would never screw me over, since I'm Liam's best customer, but I always take precautions.

My phone buzzes—Liam. You wanna make a few thousand bucks tonight?

Typical Liam, sending me cryptic texts.

Me: How?

Liam: Remember when I worked at the corner store? My buddy just told me their new security code. They stock the ATM every Thursday night. \$\$\$

I read his text over and over.

Burglary is some serious shit. When I was thirteen, I started

shoplifting—little things Dad couldn't afford, like a heavy-duty phone case and a set of AirPods after I lost mine. Sometimes I got new clothes. I even stole a pair of sunglasses for Ivy when she was going on a school trip to the beach and kept bitching about not having any. I didn't tell her they were from me; I just left them in her drawer. It's kind of thrilling, stuffing something in my pocket and walking out of the store with it. I never really needed the shit I stole, I just *wanted* it. But I really, *really* need this money.

Still, my fingers hesitate over my phone screen. Breaking in after dark to crack open an ATM would mean serious jail time if we're caught.

But it's fine. The corner store is an easy target; they get hit all the time. Plus, if Liam knows the alarm code, that's easy money. I need to get over it and just do it.

Me: Fine, but if you want my help I want twenty extra of whatever you've got. For free.

He replies within seconds. **V and K this week. You can have ten.**

Valium and Klonopin. Not a bad haul.

Me: Deal.

The second after I hit Send, I delete the texts; I know people joke about CIA agents watching our phones, but I can't be too careful.

I store my gloves in the sweatshirt pocket with my knife. Skinny jeans, black hoodie, black boots, a tiny bar in my septum piercing. I look like a punk, but not a criminal. I tuck a lock of short brown hair behind my ear. There's still a streak of platinum blond in the front, but I need to re-dye it soon. Long sleeves hide the tattoo on my arms, and my piercing may be a little conspicuous, but it's small. I run my fingers through my hair, throw on some silver liquid eyeliner and black mascara, then dab some sparkly shit on

my cheeks. Funky makeup gives me confidence sometimes, and right now, confidence is what I need.

Before I leave, I always give Pumpernickel a squeeze and a kiss. When I go out, there's always a tiny chance that I won't come back. People assume that I'll end up dead in a gutter someday, and part of me thinks they're not wrong. I guess it's better than a jail cell.

Pumpernickel's the only one who'd miss me anyway. Hell, he's probably the only one who'd even know I was gone.

Kathy's eyes are glued to some trash on MTV. When I enter the living room, her hand immediately retracts from the cigarette on the table she was obviously planning to light.

I clench my jaw. "I'm going out."

"Where are you going, honey?"

Every time she calls me *honey*, I want to slap her. "None of your business."

"Your father will ask."

I plow out the door before she can get another word in. She doesn't come after me. I fight off the sinking feeling in my stomach, forcing myself to believe I don't care.

I V Y

Jason's SUV takes a wide turn out of the school parking lot. Some indie band I don't recognize booms from the speakers. His car always smells like four-day-old McDonald's. I don't dare peek over the seat behind me to see what's lurking in the back.

We head down to Main Street, the old brick buildings and tiny storefronts sailing past us. Every five seconds, Jason slams on the brakes for a pedestrian crosswalk and we all lurch forward.

I can't stop staring at Patrick. It's super awkward, because we're in the back seat together. Jason reluctantly agreed to drive Patrick home once he realized the new kid lives three streets down from him. He would've looked like a megadouche to say no, and I would've killed him basically.

My fingers drum against my thighs. Patrick's got his arm draped over his BB-8 backpack, which is sitting in the middle seat like a fifth passenger, separating us. His blond hair has gotten so long now, it's the perfect length for me to imagine brushing my fingers through it.

"So, what was Baltimore like?" Sophie asks from the front. She always claims shotgun and this is the first time in history I didn't complain about being relegated to the back.

Patrick shrugs. "It was fine. Good food. We went to DC a lot."

"What's DC like?"

Patrick starts talking about monuments and cherry blossoms and museums, and in the rearview I can see Jason rolling his eyes.

Sophie cranes her neck to the back seat, giving me a *Why the hell are you staring at him like a creep instead of talking to him like a normal person* look.

I try to communicate *Because this is weird as hell and I honestly thought I'd never see him again and he has a little bit of stubble on his face now and it's so cute and you know I turn into an idiot around hot guys, remember the Aaron Dunlap incident?* with my eyes. I don't think the whole message gets through.

I'm busy making hand gestures at Sophie when I realize Patrick stopped talking and is now returning my stare.

I blink at him. "What?"

"Oh, I just asked what you've been up to the past four years."

I feel like I shouldn't be this awkward. Why am I always so awkward? "Not much. Nerd Herd stuff mostly. I'm in band, too. I play the trumpet but I suck at it. Mr. Warner gave me a solo for the spring pops concert, but I think he only did it because he hates me."

"Living the dream," Jason says. I kick the back of his seat.

"What's this Nerd Herd stuff?" Patrick asks.

"It's our club . . . ish. Group." Sophie ponders, tugging at her chin-length black hair. "Gang?" She's going to get a crick in her neck from twisting toward the back seat for so long.

"We play board games and video games and talk about geeky stuff," I say. "Sometimes, when we're bored, we film parody videos on our phones and post them on YouTube. It's not as exclusive as you'd think. We do occasionally talk to other people—if they make it through the hazing."

I said it as a joke, but by Patrick's expression, he took it seriously.

"That's . . . cool."

“You have a girlfriend back in Baltimore?” Sophie asks.

What the hell? I pretty much want to rip open the car door and barrel-roll outside, because I’m guessing I have a better chance of surviving that than this conversation.

Patrick shifts in his seat. “No, nothing like that.”

Sophie very obviously wiggles her eyebrows at me and I want to shrivel up and die. Thankfully, Pat changes the conversation topic.

“You guys ever do cons?”

Sophie laughs. “Well, we epic failed at one last April.”

“I maintain it was a valiant effort,” I add. Last year, Kevin’s mom drove all of us down to Boston Comic Con in her minivan. We had wanted to go as the Avengers—*Infinity War* style, so we could fake-fight on the judging stage and be badass. We even planned to do a mock “Thanos snap” and throw fake ashes all over the stage. Six main Avengers, six of us, works perfectly, right? Jason went out to get a set of Avengers action figures for costume inspiration, but he couldn’t find Black Widow anywhere—and Alexa was practically born to play Black Widow, maybe even more than ScarJo. All the toy packs were just the five dudes. So in boycott, we decided to all go as lesser-known Avengers instead. I went as Ant-Man. I swear, Ant-Man is the most underrated Marvel hero. “Let’s just say, the judges didn’t recognize our creative costumes.”

“Low-budget costumes,” Sophie corrects.

“Hey!” I pretend to look affronted. “They were innovative.”

“Would’ve helped if we’d had an Iron Man and a Cap,” Jason says.

Sophie nods. “And a Hulk. You can’t *not* recognize a big, green, snarling Hulk.”

“Next year,” I say. “We’ll plan better.”

“That’s cool. I dressed as Lee Adama for Baltimore Comic-Con

last year,” Patrick says. “I didn’t enter the judging, but they probably wouldn’t have recognized me, either.” The fact that he cosplays *Battlestar Galactica* characters literally melts my insides.

“You’d need someone to play Starbuck for that to work.” Sophie winks at me. “Hey, Ivy, you’d make a great Starbuck.”

I shoot her the deadest deadpan I can muster. Could she be any more obvious than to suggest I play Lee Adama’s sort-of girlfriend? “I don’t look anything like Starbuck, Soph. I’m not skinny, blond, a viper pilot, or covered in tattoos.”

“You could pull it off,” Patrick says. He smiles at me, then quickly looks away.

Before I have a chance to overthink that statement, Jason pulls into my dad’s driveway and jerks the car into Park. “Okay, freeloader, get out.”

“So kind.” I blow him a kiss. He pretends to be disgusted and swat it away.

“Oh, is this your new place?” Patrick asks. “I remember your house on Profile, with the massive garage.”

“Yep. We’ve been here a couple years now.” I’m always a little self-conscious about this house. The lawn looks like a jungle starter kit, there’s a mini Grand Canyon in the driveway, and I’m well aware that it’s half the size of our previous home. We tried to keep the old house after Mom died, but without her income, it wasn’t happening. There was this really bad patch when Dad took a second job, and I’m pretty sure I only saw him for forty minutes a week. Sucked when I had to bring home that band permission form in middle school asking for a hundred bucks to go to Six Flags. I almost didn’t give it to him, but I caved when he heard about it from Alexa’s parents. I didn’t even want to go on that trip; I don’t like roller coasters and I can’t comfortably fit in many ride seats

anyway. But everyone was going, and no one else had complained about the cost, so I let Dad write me the check. I still feel bad about it.

Dad never admitted it, but I think part of him didn't want to stay in that house anyway. Every room and stair and corner was tainted by Mom's passing. Even though she'd been dead for several years when we finally sold it, I could see the relief on Dad's face when we drove out of that driveway for the last time. Still, it was a way nicer house than this one. Patrick is probably super judging me for it right now.

I hate when other people think I don't notice things about my own life. Like when you go to someone's house and it stinks, but they've lived there so long they can't smell it, so you don't know if they realize how bad it is. Or when people point out I'm fat like it's breaking news to me. So I try to state the obvious as much as possible. "Dad needs to mow, it looks like shit. It's pretty small, too. I miss the old place." I don't really miss the old place. But it feels like something I should say.

"It's great," Patrick says. I can tell he's just being nice.

I grab my bag off the floor, stalling. "Hey, can I get your number?" I keep my eyes down. "So we can catch up."

"Sure! Here, give me yours, too." Patrick hands me his phone and I put my number in. Two seconds later, a text pops up on my screen: **THIS IS PATRICK PERKINS'S NUMBER** followed by a bunch of animal emojis. I add him into my contacts as P-Squared; that was his nickname back in the day.

Jason rolls his eyes. "I gotta get home, can you do that later?"

Sophie slaps his leg, giving him a look.

I climb out of the car and wave as Jason drives away. Within seconds, I'm texting Sophie.

Did Patrick say anything about me after I left?

I stare at the screen as three little dots appear. I want to grab her through the phone and tell her to type faster.

I'm so focused, I don't see my sister until I almost walk right into her car. Autumn's leaning against her Civic, smoking a joint. Right there in broad daylight. Where the hell is Dad? I already know the answer; he's working at the auto shop until eight thirty tonight.

"Hey, Autumn," I mumble, dodging away from her.

She rubs the end of her joint against the driveway and leaves it on the ground, grabbing an open can of seltzer off the roof of her car. "Ivy! Wait."

I stop dead. I don't remember the last time Autumn called me by my name. Usually she just grunts and walks past me when we're home. At school she acts like I don't exist. I mean, the only seniors who usually talk to lowly sophomore me are other band kids, but it kind of sucks when your own sister can't spare a wave when she passes you in the hall. Alexa's sister Charlotte Snapchats her from college in New York. They FaceTime every Tuesday and they're already planning stuff for when Charlotte's home for their Christmas-Hanukkah festivities. Alexa told Charlotte about losing her virginity before she told any of us. Sometimes I wish I could swap my sister for someone like her.

Once upon a time, me and Autumn would sneak out of our bedrooms at night to steal snacks from the fridge and watch movies on her iPad, one earbud for each of us, until Mom or Dad caught us and sent us back to bed. She was the first person I told about my crush on Patrick, back in the day. Then everything changed. Autumn was always there for me, until she wasn't.

Which is why it's unnerving that she's talking to me today. I fidget with my bag straps as Autumn jogs up beside me.

I can't stop staring at her hands. They're so pale and dainty for having so much figurative blood on them. She's wearing like eight thousand rings, and her black nail polish is chipping. I wonder how many pills passed through those fingers. A can of raspberry-lime seltzer is clutched in her left hand and she's using her right to fiddle with the aluminum tab. My sister is incapable of drinking anything from a can without ripping those tabs off. Why can't I stop looking at her hands?

Her fingers push the tab back and forth, back and forth.

"Do you know where I can find Hailey Waters?" she asks. It's an innocent enough question, if I didn't know my sister.

Hailey Waters sits behind me in band. She plays the trombone, is really awesome at winging her eyeliner, and loaned me her bio notes last year when I had mono. Right now, she's probably at her boyfriend's place, or hanging out with the soccer girls at White Park, or at the indie movie theater where she works. God, I hope she's not mixed up in Autumn's bullshit.

"Nope." I blink. "Never heard of her."

Snap. The tab flicks off the can and tumbles to the grass, where Autumn leaves it.

She narrows her eyes at me and takes a solid swig of seltzer before climbing into her car. It's a used Civic Dad got her from an impound auction a couple years ago, but it's still more than anything I'll ever get.

"Where are you going?" I don't know why I ask. I don't really want to know.

"To church to confess my sins. To a food drive to help the less fortunate. To receive an award for good citizenship." Her tone grows increasingly sarcastic with each additional option. "Pick the one that makes you happiest and get the fuck out of my way."

Meredith Tate

I step off the driveway just in time to avoid getting run over as she guns it, disappearing down the street.

My phone does a classic Wookiee growl, alerting me to a new text. But I'm still staring at the empty road.

I'm not sure why, but I'm struck with a bad feeling.