

LICENSE TO SPILL

A PRETENDERS NOVEL

BY #1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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poppy

Little, Brown and Company
New York Boston

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Poppy

Hachette Book Group
237 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10017
Visit our website at lb-teens.com

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First Edition: June 2014

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Harrison, Lisi.

License to spill / Lisi Harrison. — First edition.
pages cm. — (Pretenders)

Summary: "The second-quarter journal entries of five freshmen at ultra-competitive Noble High detail the students' ongoing quest to become the Phoenix Five—the most outstanding first-year students in the school"—Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-0-316-22242-6 (hardback) — ISBN 978-0-316-22237-2 (ebook) —
ISBN 978-0-316-32286-7 (library edition ebook)

[1. High schools—Fiction. 2. Schools—Fiction. 3. Diaries—
Fiction. 4. Friendship—Fiction. 5. Dating (Social customs)—
Fiction. 6. Family life—New Jersey—Fiction.
7. New Jersey—Fiction.] I. Title.

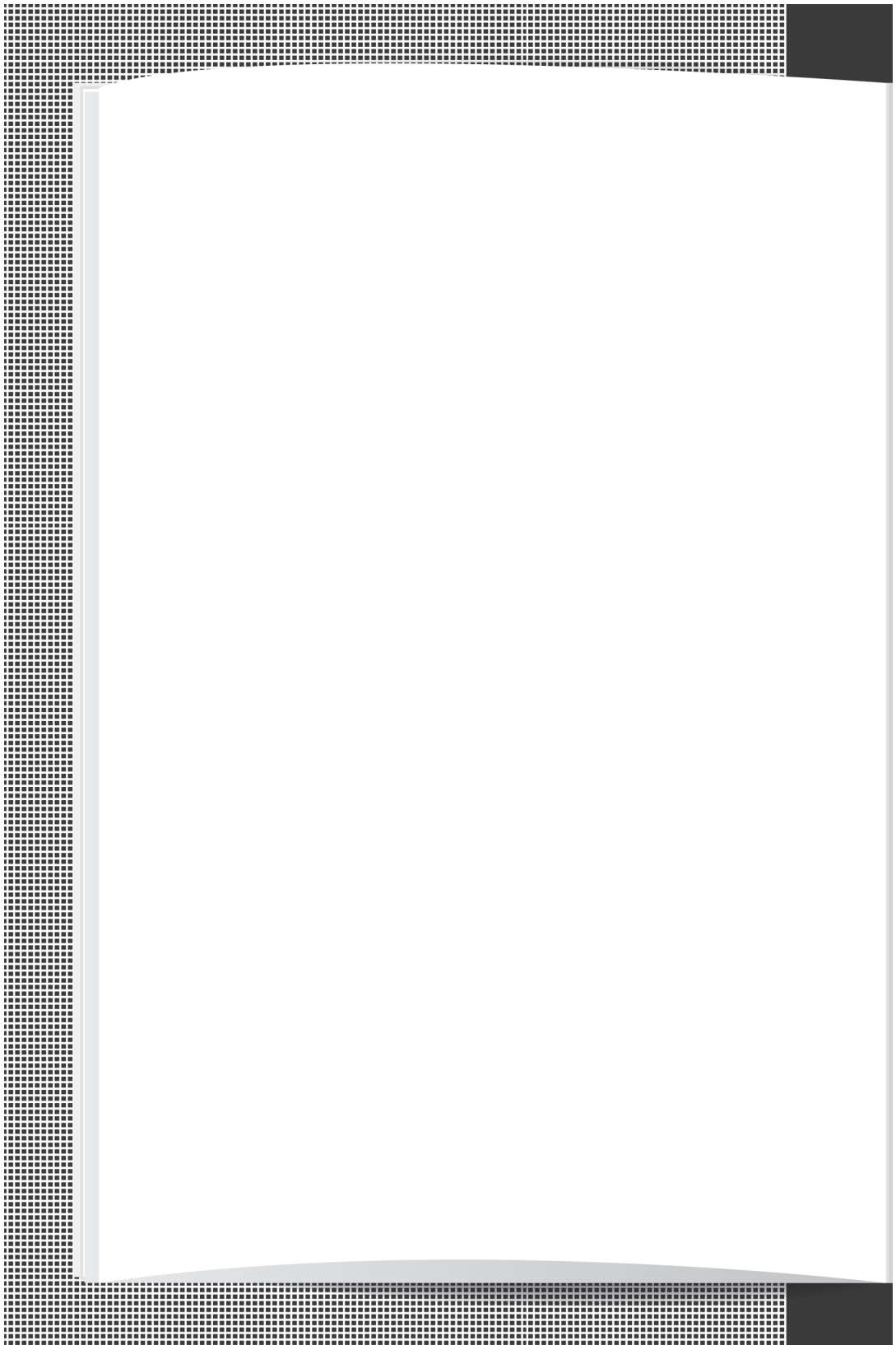
PZ7.H2527Lic 2014 [Fic]—dc23 2013050870

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RRD-C

Printed in the United States of America

LICENSE TO SPILL



October 2012

I know X-actly what you're thinking. I read your comments online; I hear you whispering in the halls. Many of you say it straight to my face because you don't know I'm X. Things like: "Pretenders had zero resolution." "You call that an ending?!" "Will Duffy win his friends back? Does Lily get pulled from Noble High? Arrested for stalking? Both? Who is sending threats to Vanessa? Can Sheridan stop Octavia from stealing the show? And who is Jagger? Simply put, that was 292 pages of cliff-hanger, 0 pages of closure."

Don't worry, *License to Spill* will be much more satisfying. I ended *Pretenders* abruptly to see if you wanted more. And it seems like you do. Which means this is no longer *my* crime, it's *ours*: the Phoenix Five's for keeping secrets, me for spilling them, and yours for soaking them up. Remove any one of these players and no one gets hurt. It takes all three.

Which role did you play?

Not that I care. I'm just glad you came back for more.

X



Jagger

Oct. 12.

Dad just left my bedroom but not before a thorough interrogation.

Q: Son, are you aware of the time?

(10:16 PM.)

A: No.

Q: You missed curfew.

A: My bike chain fell off.

Q: Why didn't you call?

A: Battery died.

Q: You said you were getting a ride to Octavia's party.

A: My friend got food poisoning. Anyway, biking is better for the environment.

Dad said, good point. He likes when I think on a global scale.

I yawned and told him I needed sleep. What I really needed was for him to cut the third degree because my forehead was starting to sweat. It must be the secrets inside of me trying to get out. I'm leaking lies. My skin can't hold them back. If they get out

I'd.

Be.

Ruined.

Audri would know the real me. My parents would know the fake me. And I'd go back to being the old me.

Only worse.

Way worse.

Like if Way Worse got jumped by Total Disaster, Living Nightmare, and Public Humiliation and the whole thing was posted on YouTube. Translated into 130 languages. Turned into a cautionary tale and sold in a boxed set with *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* and *The Fall of Icarus*.

Like that.

Only worse.

Way, way worse.

-J

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sheridan". The letter 'i' in "Sheridan" has a small star above it. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

INT. BEDROOM—NIGHT.

SHERIDAN SPENCER taps "play" on her iPhone.
Pink's "F**kin' Perfect" begins.

My night was a F**kin' Disaster.

It started when I asked Lily Bader-Huffman if she thought Duffy invited her to the fashion show as his date. I was merely trying to assess the motivation behind her glossy hair and tight red dress. She started crying and then bolted. Now I feel all Guilty Hawn.

Shortly thereafter I accepted Octavia's last-minute party invite when I should have known it was a trap. She wasn't

looking for a fresh start. She wanted to prove that Logan was using me for Dad's BMW M3 GTR. And she did, super publicly, thankyouverymuch.

I was so humiliated my limbs seized up. So when Duffy called and Logan answered and told Duffy that he was my boyfriend I was powerless to stop him. I just tried to call Duffy, but he sent me straight to voice mail so that's all messed up too.

But the worst part of my night is the result of a different terrible night. One that haunts me like Banquo's ghost haunts Macbeth in "The Scottish Play" whose title I shall never mention because every actor knows it's bad luck to do so. Only instead of Banquo, this harbinger of regret comes in the way of Vanessa Riley, that smart girl from my science class. The one who saw me torch my Massie Block scarf with a Bunsen burner. The one who somehow knows about that joyride I took with Logan.

It turns out the salesman who got blamed for taking the car was her brother, A.J. Now I have 72 hours to make Dad rehire him at the dealership or Vanessa is going to rat me out. Feeling dizzy.

I need soda.

No, a snack.

No, a rainbow.

Skittles.

CUT.

To Be Continued...

END SCENE.

DUFFY

Friday

Officer Boyle showed up five minutes after I called 911. I thought he'd come inside and wait for Lily to get home so he could question her about stealing my personal belongings and hiding them in *her* closet. But he just hung on my porch and asked *me* a bunch of questions.

COP: Has she been lurking?

ME: Lurking?

COP: You know, hiding in the bushes? Following you?

ME: No.

COP: Calling you several times a day?

ME: No.

COP: Watching you with surveillance equipment?

ME: How would I know?

COP: True. Sending inappropriate gifts?

ME: No.

COP: Showing up the moment you need saving?

ME: Huh? No. I mean, yes! I Wiped down the stairs once and she helped me up.

COP: How did you react?

ME: I thanked her.

COP: After you thanked her, did she leave or linger?

ME: Linger.

COP: What did you do?

ME: I gave her a dollar.

COP: Why?

ME: I thought she was waiting for a tip.

COP: A tip?

ME: You know, for helping.

He wrote something on his pad. I tried to peek. He tilted it toward his badge.

COP: Has she ever manipulated a situation so she could be alone with you?

Feeling = Yes! Lily was always in my room buying Trendemic clothes. She was my best customer. But my job has to stay a secret so I withheld evidence.

ME: No.

Feeling = Does he know I'm lying?

COP: Have you told your parents about this?

ME: They're out.

He closed his notebook. It sounded like a slap across the face. Felt like one too.

COP: This girl needs guidance.

GUIDANCE? GUIDANCE? GUIDANCE?
GUY DUNCE! Lily is a GUY DUNCE!

Officer Boyle started walking down the porch steps.

ME: That's it? *Guidance*?

COP: What do you want from me, kid?

Feeling = Why do police officers say slick things like "kid"?

ME: Arrest her!

COP: For what?

ME: Stealing? Stalking? Being weird!

COP: Weirdness is a tough thing to prove.

ME: My things were in her closet!

COP: Why were *you* in her closet?

Feeling = Whose side is he on?

ME: My dogs led me there.

COP: Incredible creatures, aren't they?

ME: I guess.

COP: Did you take your things back?

ME: No.

COP: Why?

ME: I didn't want to tamper with a crime scene.

Officer Boyle laughed when I said that. Not the way Hud and Coops do when I Wipe. More how Mandy did when I told her Robert Pattinson has chlorine-eyes. Like, wow-interesting-point.

COP: Sounds like an innocent crush to me.

ME: *Innocent?*

COP: You're a good-looking boy, Andrew, and you're at that age. Girls are going to do some wild things to get your attention. Get used to it, son. Heck, enjoy it. There are worse problems, kid.

ME: Can you at least give her that thing Chris Brown got after he punched Rihanna?

COP: A restraining order?

ME: Yeah.

Right when he started writing up the order a call came in on his walkie-talkie. The public bathrooms at Regal Park had been vandalized.

Feeling = He should have said: I'm knee-deep in an investigation. Assign someone else. But he looked at me and said: Duty calls.

Feeling = He said *duty*.

I would have cracked up if Hud and Coops were there. But they weren't. They aren't talking to me. So even though my face wanted to laugh at "duty" my brain wouldn't let it.

He tore the restraining order off his pad and handed it to me. It said:

I.D.E.A.L.

I—Ignore.

DE—Don't Engage.

A—Avoid.

L—Leading her on.

ME: Shouldn't it say something about Lily going to jail if she takes my things again?

COP: Speak to your parents, follow my instructions, and you should be fine.

ME: But—

COP: Get used to it, Heartbreaker.

Then he left.

Feeling = Heartbreaker?!

Am I really the kind of guy girls have crushes on? (Not including Lily because I still think she has a mental disorder.) Relatives call me “handsome” and Mandy’s friends say things like, “What a little hottie,” but I figured they were just trying to make me blush. I started to wonder what Sheridan thought but I made myself stop because the guy we wanted to ship to Vietnam is now answering her phone and that hurts.

Anyway, I was on the porch thinking about all this when I heard skateboard wheels grinding along the pavement.

Lily rolled up my driveway with leaves in her hair and a scrape on her knee. She looked like she’d clawed her way out of a grave which made me wonder what else she’s capable of.

Feeling = Stay calm.

Feeling = I couldn’t.

I ran inside.

She started throwing rocks at my bedroom window.

Feeling = This is not an innocent crush.

LILY: I can help you, I can help you!

Feeling = The old rescue thing again.

Feeling = Officer Boyle needs to hear this.

I was about to record her when Mrs. Bader-Huffman pulled her inside.

Feeling = I am sleeping with Bubbie Libby until Mom and Dad get home.

-LATER



Lily

Saturday, October 13, 2012

I wasn't even close to done with my previous entry when Mom came into my room.

"Shut your journal," she said.

I wrapped up with a quick sentence about lying on Blake's belly searching the sky for shooting stars. I wanted to write about the policeman who busted Blake and me for hanging on the roof of Noble High. How I made Blake go back to Octavia's party to find Vanessa so she'd hack into the computer and change my grades. How Blake said everything he could to cheer me up about my non-date with Duffy, but Mom said, "Now!"

"Would you mind telling me what happened out there tonight?"

“It’s a big world, Nora, could you be more specific?”

“Alan!” she called. “Can you come in here?”

I knew I was being rude. I knew Mom didn’t deserve it. I didn’t care. I wanted to make her angry. I wanted to know that my behavior affected her. That she loved me enough to hate me. Because the opposite of love isn’t hate, it’s indifference. And I didn’t think I’d survive the night if one more person acted like I didn’t matter.

“What’s going on?” Dad asked safely from the doorway. He’s a bloodhound when it comes to sniffing out tension, a scaredy-cat when it comes to dealing with it.

“Bottom line?” Mom said. “Eight years ago I gave up my career as a child psychologist to homeschool our daughter. Then one day she begged me to let her try public school and against my better judgment, I gave in. Now, after six short weeks, everything I taught her, everything she was”—Mom snapped her fingers—“is gone.”

“How can you say that?” I asked.

“Let’s see.” Mom tapped her chin. “You’ve been coming home late from school, you joined some style club that has you dressing like a European club kid, you lied about your plans tonight, I just found you throwing rocks at the neighbors’ windows—”

“No,” I said. “How can you say ‘six short weeks’ when all weeks are seven days? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Enough!” Dad snapped. (Finally!) “What’s going on, Lily?”

I considered the truth: that I’m a sheltered veal trying

to make it in a free-range world. And that I was foolhardy enough to believe that Andrew Duffy, the leader of that free-range world, wanted to be my guide. With his green eyes and careless hair. His basketball skills and Nike gear, his hoodies and video game high scores. His insouciant gait, loud music, spicy energy drinks, popular sister, nameless dogs, seasonal lawn decorations, and friends with monosyllabic nicknames.

Guys like that don't like girls like me. With my diarrhea-brown eyes and frizzy hair. My useless ability to quote the classics and say the alphabet backward in under a minute. My Encyclopaedia Britannicas and frumpy wardrobe. My highlighter manicures, kosher sandwiches, obsession with the word "Coxsackie," my intellectual Homies, and my best friend, Blake, who refuses to tell anyone he's gay.

If Sheridan Spencer didn't tell me that Duffy's invitation to the fashion show wasn't a date, I might still think I had a chance. For that I blame my parents.

Sheltering me from the public school system made me book smart, but socially illiterate. Maybe if Mom taught me how to read *people* instead of Latin I wouldn't have needed Sheridan Spencer to translate Duffy. I wouldn't have had my hair straightened or my makeup done. I wouldn't have worn a dress. A tight one. A red one! I wouldn't have been skateboarding alone in the dark, crying. Tears wouldn't have blurred my vision and I wouldn't have fallen. I wouldn't have scraped my knee or landed in a pile of leaves.

A police car was backing out of Duffy's driveway as I

rounded the corner, and I couldn't help wondering if maybe Blake had been right. What if something was wrong with Duffy? Something serious? What if he had every intention of meeting me but couldn't? Like in *An Affair to Remember* when Terry is supposed to meet Nickie on the observation deck of the Empire State Building and is hit by a car. Nickie eventually gives up, never knowing that she is in the hospital. . . .

I rolled up Duffy's driveway all worried. He was standing on his porch. I smiled with relief and hurried toward him to make sure he was okay, but he ran inside and slammed the door.

I stood there for a moment, dumbfounded. Did he really just do that? Because pretending someone doesn't exist when they're standing two feet away is a bold move. So bold that it had me thinking I was a ghost. Like my figurative feelings of invisibility had turned me invisible for real.

Since I hadn't done a single thing to elicit this kind of reaction, I suspected something sinister was at play. Like maybe he was being held hostage. And somehow he notified the police but his captor caught on and forced him to get rid of the Boys in Blue. After which he was told to run back inside or the whole family would be blown to bits, starting with the nameless dogs. . . .

As I was contemplating my next move, an upstairs light flicked on, then off. He was trying to communicate. I threw a rock to let him know I was here for him.

When he didn't respond, I called, "I can help you! I can help you! I will!"

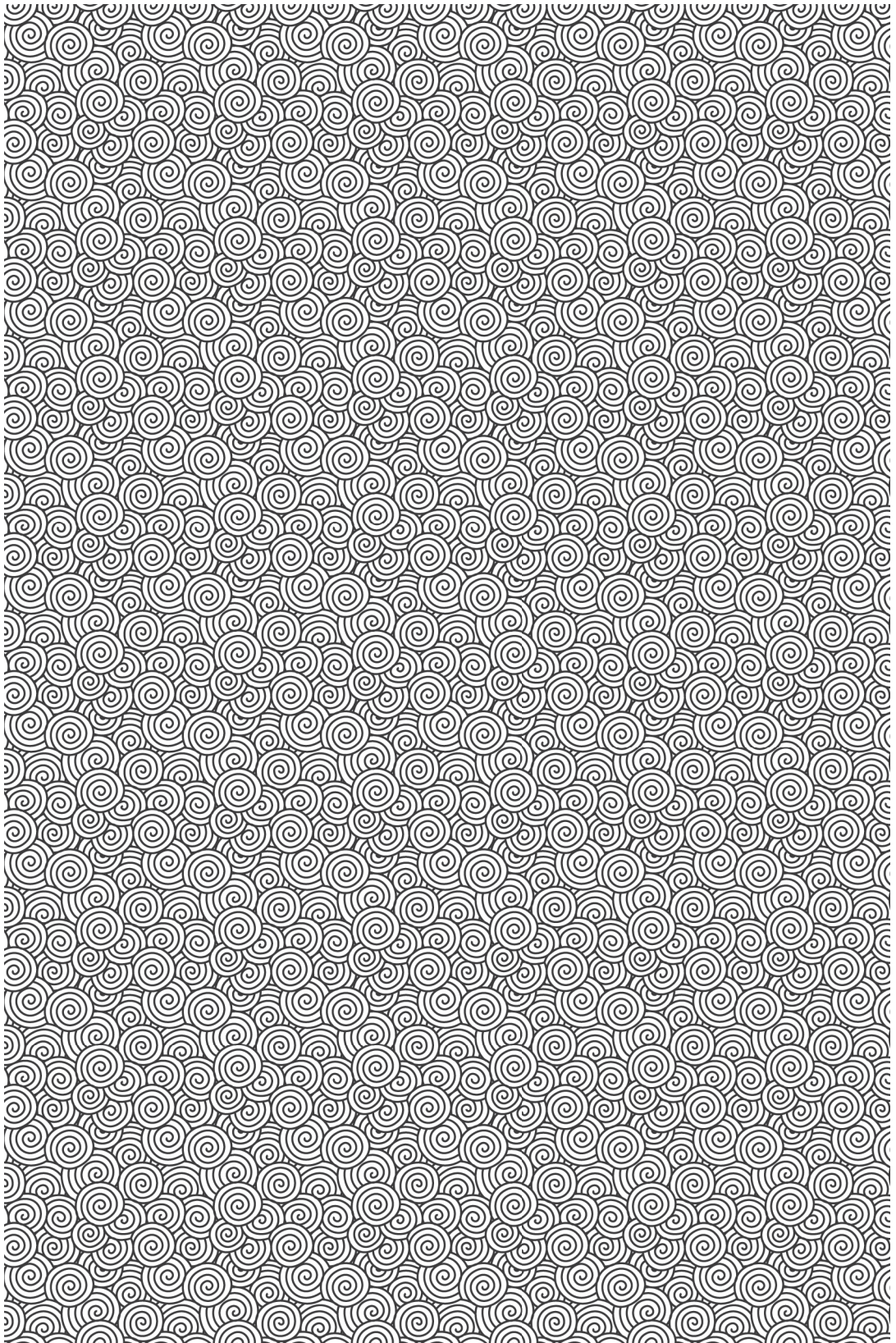
That's when Mom pulled me inside and sent me to my room, which smells a lot like dog poo for some reason. Maybe because everything in my life has turned to—

"Lily, answer your father," Mom pressed. "What is going on with you? We're starting to worry."

I couldn't go into the whole thing so I said, "My plans got all messed up, that's all. I was expecting Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* and it turned into Munch's *The Scream*. You've always taught me to manage my expectations and you were right. Lesson learned."

Mom smiled proudly. Then I did too. She still isn't sure what's gotten into me lately and I still don't have a clue why Duffy is ignoring me. But that moment proved that we both matter. And that's all we really wanted to know.

Lily Bader-Huffman-Duffy



Jagger

Oct. 13.

So there I am, putting marmalade on my toast, when out of nowhere Mother drops the F-bomb.

– A *facial*, I say. Why would *I* want a *facial*?

– I can see the congestion in your pores from across the table. And that’s without my readers.

I say it’s probably a rash or something. But I know it’s not. It’s my lies. They’re trying to get out.

As soon as she leaves for tennis I put on my ski pants, a thermal, my Vampire Weekend tee, a wool sweater, and a hat.

I set the timer in the sauna for twenty minutes and get in.

After one minute I find it hard to breathe.

After three minutes my vision blurs.

After five I slump over.

My cheek lands on the metal hook of my old ski pass. It burns. I scream. I stumble toward the door handle.

I step into the bathroom and guzzle the cool air.

I yank off my clothes.

My chest is purple. My left cheek has been branded with two red lines.

I lean closer to the mirror to see if five minutes was enough to sweat out my lies.

I'm so dizzy I fall down.

Ms. Silver comes to me in a dream.

She says journals are a safe place for unpopular thoughts and tells me to bury my lies in these pages.

I ask if that will free up my pores.

She says my pores and my brain.

I say, okay.

Anything to keep Mother from dropping another F-bomb.

LIE #1: My parents, Carla and Ed, were sent to jail on February 13, 2011 for bully beating.

LIE #2: They are on death row.

LIE #3: A social worker came and took me away the day they were arrested.

LIE #4: I've been emancipated since I was fourteen.

LIE #5: I live in the back room of Randy's Exotic Pets.

LIE #6: Randy lets me live there as long as I feed his pets at night.

LIE #7: Randy meets with international pet dealers who carry guns.

LIE #8: I hop the train to Manhattan to visit my parents in jail. (Is there even a jail in Manhattan? I should probably find out.)

LIE #9: Mom is a health teacher. Dad is a pharmacist.

LIE #10: I can sign my own permission slips and report cards.

LIE #11: I stole a bike.

LIE #12: I am being followed by an ex-navy SEAL named Crazy Pat who is seeking revenge for Pat Jr., the bully my parents beat.

LIE #13: I told Audri that FemFresh pen came inside my journal bag.

LIE #14: I said I thought FemFresh was an organic food company.

LIE #15: I won a debate on the death penalty because my parents are on death row.

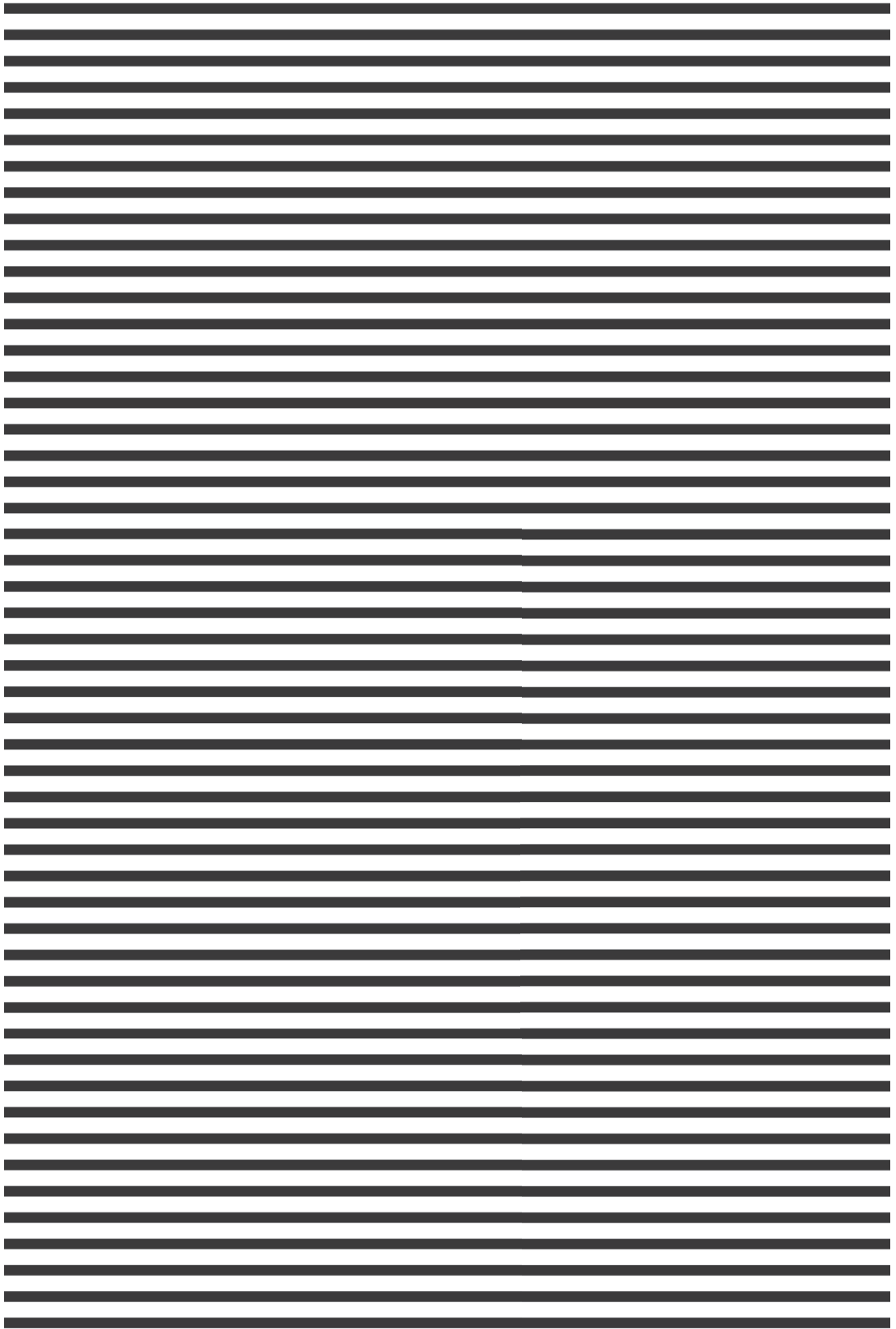
LIE #16: I told Audri I know what it feels like to lose a family. I said I cry about it.

LIE #17: I told Audri that Crazy Pat was at Octavia's party.

LIE #18: Everything I told Father last night was a lie. (Even my yawn. I wasn't tired at all.)

-J

(LIE #19: My first initial is J.)





Vanessa

October 13th

I just paused *SNL* right in the middle of Christina Applegate's opening monologue so I could journal. Because when I write I can't scratch. If I can't scratch, my arms won't look like they've been beaten by Twizzlers.

Ver? I miss middle school. Life was so rewarding⁶² back then. I was a role model, model citizen, and lead model in the Fashion for Felines fund-raiser at the pet rescue center. Now everything is so complicated and so so itchy. Everyone said Noble High would be hard but I didn't think it would be hard for *me*. Just average people. Oh my god, what if I'm average?

⁶² Literally. I have 159 awards.

ITCHY!

I know I shouldn't think about it, but I can't stop. I shouldn't have left Lily on the roof of Noble last night. I should have hacked her grades like I promised. So what if she stole Blake from me. If I hacked her grades instead of holding a grudge, she wouldn't be able to tell on me for hacking my own because she'd be guilty too.

Now she's sending snail-mail threats. Here's the latest:

I KNEW YOU WERE UP TO SOMETHING.
NOW I HAVE PROOF.

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! So itchy so so so itchy so so soooooooo . . . I have to scratch. . . .

UGH!

To live in uncertainty is to die scratching.⁶³

At least I found a way to get A.J. his job back at the BMW dealership. Correction, I confronted the girl who stole the car and let my brother take the blame. Turns out it was Sheridan Spencer, the boss's daughter. I told that unethical Barbie she better make things right or I'd take her down.

. . . Unless Lily takes me down first.

I can't let her. She can't take Blake and my pride in the same month. I won't let her. I'd sooner turn myself in.⁶⁴

⁶³Doesn't that sound profound?

⁶⁴I bet there's a prize for being honest; like a Medal of Martyrdom or a Ribbon of Reform.

Hmmm...

I could blame my lapse in judgment on my unstable home life. Principal Alden would feel sorry for me and let me off with a warning. News of my hacking would go viral and soon I'd be fielding job offers from Microsoft and Apple. Of course I'd turn them down... at least until I was sure Mom and Dad's marriage was back on track. Which of course it would be the moment they realized that their constant fighting drove me to hack in the first place.

O my G. Problem solved. Forgive me, Principal Alden, for I have sinned...

Now back to Christina.