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The Lying Game

Written by Tess Stimson

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tess stimson

the lying game

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For my husband,

Erik.

You're still the one I run to.

THE TIMES

BIRTHS

LOCKWOOD

On 3rd February 1998, at the
Princess Eugenie Hospital, London,
to Harriet (née Morgan) and Oliver,
a beautiful daughter,
Florence Louise May.

Harriet

If my mother could see me now, Harriet thought wryly as she reached the top of the hillside and bent to cup her knees, panting. For the first twenty-six years of her life she had, like her parents and three younger sisters, been a sophisticated London urbanite: taxi-hailers and latte drinkers all, they'd had the shortcuts of the city inscribed on their hearts and considered the world beyond the M25 as alien and impenetrable as the Amazon jungle.

And then she'd met Oliver Lockwood and her life had been transformed in a way she never could have anticipated.

She straightened now and shaded her eyes to take in the spectacular view. The spring foliage hadn't yet started to come in, so she could see right through the bare trees to the valley below. On a distant slope opposite, ski trails poured down from the mountain summit like rivers of white paint. She couldn't believe how quiet it was, even for rural Vermont, a state one-fifth the size of England with a population of barely six hundred and fifty thousand. Up

here, there was no thrum of traffic, no sirens, no planes passing overhead; just the faint whisper of the wind in the trees. Ironical that she'd moved four thousand miles across the ocean to New England and discovered an old England that hadn't existed since before she was born.

Tugging off her thick sheepskin gloves, she pulled out her phone and checked the time. No reception here, she noticed, slightly anxiously; not even one bar. Well, she wasn't going to be long. She'd seen what she needed to see. She'd be home soon, no harm done.

Nonetheless, she picked up her pace as she turned east along the ridgeline. She really shouldn't have come this far from home, not with Oliver a hundred miles away in Connecticut, where he was scouting out a possible location for their latest restaurant, leaving Harriet the parent on call. This wasn't just a nominal responsibility in the Lockwood household, given that their fifteen-year-old daughter Florence had had juvenile diabetes since she was six, and Charlie, at five the youngest of their three boys, had chronic asthma. Either she or Oliver found themselves being called out to one of their expensive private schools to deal with a medical crisis at least twice a month.

She turned at an orange flag marking the boundary of the eleven-acre property for sale and headed back downhill, picking her way carefully through a spider's web of transparent tubing that snaked from one sugar maple to another: there were miles of it – literally two or three miles – weaving back and forth from tree to tree like a giant cat's cradle. It was March, so the tubes were full of maple sap. The clear liquid flowed down the mountain to the holding vats she'd seen earlier behind the small wooden sugar house at the foot of the hill, where it would be boiled off and turned into the familiar amber syrup.

The Lying Game

Sugar house. How could Florence not be tempted by that? Even thinking the word made her mouth water. The first time she'd stood in a hot, steaming sugar shack twelve years ago, at the end of their first long, bitter Vermont winter, inhaling the mist of maple syrup as it rose from the evaporators, she thought she'd died and gone to heaven. There was nothing quite as sinfully delicious as the treat Vermonters called sugar-on-snow: hot maple syrup drizzled like lace onto a cup of fresh snow.

She ducked under a maple tube, careful not to dislodge it from the tree. Was it too much to hope that the sugar house would – she smiled inwardly at the pun – sweeten the pill for Florence? Maple syrup was her daughter's one weakness; perhaps the only preference the two of them shared. And lately they'd managed to get her diabetes under control, more or less. Enough for the odd cup of sugar-on-snow, anyway.

She sighed as she zipped her fleece higher against the chill wind coming off the mountain. Florence remained adamantly opposed to the idea of a weekend cabin – 'It's bad enough,' she'd said furiously, 'having to live in Hicksville when I could be in London, without being dragged off to some stupid cabin in the middle of nowhere with three disgusting brothers every weekend' – and Harriet knew that no amount of maple syrup was going to change her daughter's mind.

Sometimes she couldn't help feeling a little cheated. Four children and only one girl, a daughter so unlike herself it was hard to believe they were related. 'I know the feeling,' her mother Sophie had told her briskly when she'd ventured to raise the topic during her visit home to London the previous summer. 'If you hadn't been born at home, I'd

have thought they'd switched you at the hospital. Look at your sisters – two in fashion and one in broadcasting, not a car between them, not one of them further away from us than SW6. And then there's you. Half a world away, only happy when you're sorting out somebody's crisis. I swear the only time I ever saw you smile as a child was when we took you to Glastonbury and the tent collapsed and we all had to sleep out in the open in the middle of a muddy field.'

Florence didn't even look like Harriet. She took after Oliver, all glowing caramel skin and blonde health and vitality with the same vivid blue eyes, whereas Harriet and the boys were pale and dark and slender. Harriet found it impossible to hold a meaningful conversation with her daughter; they simply didn't know what to say to each other. And it had nothing to do with her being a teenager, despite what Oliver said. Of course she took it personally! What mother wouldn't? The truth was, Harriet had *never* known what to say to her.

In the beginning, when Florence, her first child, was born and she'd struggled with the shock of motherhood and this tiny, screaming, red-faced package of demands, she'd thought her discomfort was just a question of it all being so *new*, so different, so completely unlike anything she'd done before. Even though Oliver had been just as new to it all and yet seemed able to tell the difference between a hungry cry and a tired one as easily as separating apples from oranges.

Then she'd got the hang of things and developed an efficient routine, telling herself anxiously that it was just as commendable to be a good mother as a natural one, whatever *that* was – but Florence had still looked at her with the distant, quizzical blue gaze of a stranger, clearly waiting for something Harriet simply hadn't known how to give.

The Lying Game

She loved her daughter; there was no question of *that*. She'd have walked over hot coals for Florence from the second she heard her first cry. But there was never any real connection between them. Right from the beginning, they were almost painfully polite with one another. Harriet would crouch down on the floor to play with the blocks Florence was building, and the little girl would simply stop what she was doing and wait patiently for her mother to finish before resuming on her own.

But when Florence played with her father, she giggled and knocked over his tower and handed him bricks. Which meant that the problem must be *her* fault. She obviously lacked some crucial maternal instinct. She'd failed at the most important thing she'd ever attempted, and she'd had no idea what to do to put it right.

So she'd retreated into what she *did* know how to do. While Oliver had stayed at home and brainstormed ideas for Play-Doh and finger foods, she'd thrown herself back into work, using her PR skills to take their fledgling sandwich business so far so fast that America had quickly become their logical next step.

And then she'd found herself pregnant again. It hadn't been planned, of course; Oliver had been very keen to have a second child, but privately she'd been terrified of the idea, thinking it akin to throwing good money after bad. However, things couldn't have been more different this time around. The bond between her and baby Samuel had been instant and profound, and for the first time she'd realized exactly what she and Florence were missing. It had been the same with George four years later, and Charlie three years after that. She'd found mothering her sons as easy as breathing. It was only with her daughter that she'd failed.

Slipping slightly in the slushy snow, Harriet reached the bottom of the hill and took a few more photos on her phone for Oliver. She already knew this piece of land was perfect: just an hour away from Burlington, it was rural enough to feed into his rose-tinted need for the full New England experience, but sufficiently proximate to town-maintained roads and electricity pylons to make building a cabin financially viable. It was Oliver's dream, really, the cabin, not hers, but over the years she'd learned that if she left things to him, they would never happen. He specialized in dreams; she was the one who made them reality.

In some ways, it made them the perfect team. She didn't have an ounce of flair or vision herself, but she'd always known exactly how to make the most of his, turning his off-the-grid idea for a green fast-food chain into a successful international business. She could forgive him a little hopeless dreaminess; these days, it was even part of why she loved him.

She knew how lucky she was to have such a good marriage, such a *happy* marriage. Among her half-dozen closest girlfriends, she was the only one without a divorce under her belt. She trusted Oliver implicitly. Even after sixteen years together and four children, he was still her lover, her rock and her best friend – the person she turned to first thing in the morning and last thing at night. With him, she knew what it was to be cherished. He brought her tea in bed in the morning, he rubbed her feet when she was tired, he got up in the night to look after Charlie if he had one of his asthma attacks because he knew how much she needed her sleep. These were the things that mattered, not flowers on their anniversary or expensive jewellery at Christmas – though Oliver gave her those things too. Her mother

reminded her frequently that she was blessed, but really Harriet didn't need to be told.

She was just climbing into her ancient Land Cruiser when her phone rang. With a slight sigh, Harriet tugged off her gloves again and answered it.

'This is Denise at Fletcher Allen Hospital,' the woman said. 'Is that Mrs Lockwood?' Harriet chilled. *Not Charlie*, she begged instinctively. *Not again*. Their last trip to the ER, a week before Christmas, had frightened her so badly she hadn't slept for a week afterwards. She didn't think there was anything worse than watching your child literally fighting for every breath. Florence's diabetic lows she'd learned to cope with. A juice box, some glucose tablets, and she was usually fine. She had cross-country practice today; knowing Florence, she'd probably forgotten to load up on carbs first and her sugar had dipped. Going on past experience, by the time Harriet reached the hospital, she'd be up and about and itching to get back to her friends.

She loved all her children equally, of course, but if she had to choose, if she really *had* to choose, it was better that Florence had a crisis than Charlie.

Instantly, she felt guilty. *Only because Charlie is so much sicker*, she amended quickly. She could never actually *choose* between her children. She might not understand Florence the way she understood the boys, but she'd loved her for fifteen years – loved her passionately – and nothing would ever change that.

She took a deep breath. 'Harriet Lockwood here,' she said, and waited.

Florence

Florence's day hadn't started well. It rarely did, since Mom insisted on eating breakfast with her (her mother was somehow convinced eating breakfast together would stop her from getting pregnant or smoking or becoming a Republican or whatever it was her mother was so scared of) and then silently begrudged her every tiny morsel she put in her mouth. It wasn't Florence's fault she was fat. Not everyone could be a perfect size zero like her mother.

They sat in silence at the breakfast table, since Dad had already left to take the boys to their school, and she chomped her way through her second bagel, watching her mother try hard not to notice.

'I thought I'd come and watch you run this afternoon,' Mom said suddenly.

She looked up, alarmed. 'It's only a practice,' she said. 'Not a meet.'

'I know. But it's been ages since I came to cheer you on, and one of my suppliers cancelled on me, so I've got a

couple of hours spare later.’ She smiled brightly. ‘I thought it would be nice if we spent some time together.’

Sometimes Florence wished her mother would just stop *trying*. It would be so much easier on both of them.

She ducked her head again, her ash-blonde hair tumbling across her face. It wasn’t that she didn’t like talking to her mother, exactly. As parents went, Mom was OK: she didn’t stick her with tons of chores or demand to know where she was every minute of the day. But Mom was always worrying about her diabetes, checking up on her, asking her questions, making such a big deal about it all, and sometimes she just wanted to *forget*. She never knew how to respond to Mom’s earnest attempts to be her friend. She never had. Mom always seemed to be looking for something *more* from her, though she had no idea what that might be. So, as usual when she didn’t know what to say to her mother, she said nothing.

‘I don’t have to come if you don’t want me to,’ Mom said finally in a tone that made Florence squirm with guilt. ‘It was just an idea.’

‘I told you,’ she muttered, flushing. ‘There’s no point. It’s just a practice.’

‘Yes, of course.’ She stood and briskly started to stack the dishwasher. ‘Maybe I’ll go check out some land instead.’

Florence scowled. *Whatever*. Bad enough that she was stuck in this boring little town in this boring dead-end state without spending her weekends trapped in a stupid cabin a million miles from anywhere. She still didn’t see why her parents couldn’t have stayed in London. At least then she might have had a *life*.

Normally she’d have dumped her woes on her best friend Amy when she got to school and felt a whole lot better, but last week they’d fallen out over Matt Shaw (who Amy

hadn't even noticed till Florence told her she liked him), and the cherry on the cake? Her period had just started. So she wasn't exactly in the mood for algebra and Spanish, and even less in the mood for a cross-country run. Which meant that when it came to it that afternoon, she found herself dawdling alone in a corner of the changing room, hanging back till everyone else had left.

She wasn't much of a runner at the best of times. Or a swimmer, or a basketball player, or a skier. She took after Dad: she was built for comfort, not speed, as her grandmother had once put it bluntly. There was no euphemism for 'fat' Florence hadn't heard: *big-boned*, *statuesque*, *Amazonian*. Mom kept saying she'd grow into herself, whatever that meant, but frankly, at five-foot-ten in her bare (size nine) feet, her breasts spilling from their D-cups, she'd grown quite enough already, thank you very much. Next to Mom, petite and boyish and elegantly flat-chested, she felt like an elephant. Poor Mom. Three boys and one daughter, and it had to be the girl who was built like a quarterback.

She caught up with the rest of the class, already streaming across the playing fields to the woods at the rear of the school, and fell into a steady pace around the middle of the pack where no one would notice her. She usually managed to just about hold her own. Vermont, liberal and hippy and green in every sense of the word, was a state where everyone was active and sporty, where no one drove if they could cycle, or cycled if they could walk. She'd long since realized that if you couldn't beat them you might as well join them, at least if you wanted to have friends, so she'd picked the lesser of many evils and opted to make cross-country running her *thing*, so she could at least go at her own pace and stop for a rest if she had to.

The Lying Game

Even she had to admit it was a beautiful day to be in the woods. The air was crisp and cold, the sky so bright a blue it hurt. Beneath the trees, purple and white crocuses spiked through thinning patches of snow. She wasn't puffing as much as usual, either, and for once she didn't have a stitch. Maybe Mom was right; perhaps she *was* fitter than she thought.

'Left,' a male voice said behind her.

Automatically, Florence moved out of the runner's way. Matt Shaw strode easily to the front of the field – he must've been late to class or he'd have headed the pack to begin with – and she watched him casually fall into step beside Amy and Olivia, her heart twisting with misery. Florence was only too aware he didn't even know she existed. But she could dream.

She didn't see the patch of ice until it was too late.

She'd tripped and fallen loads of times on cross-country runs. Everybody did; it went with the territory. If you didn't want the rest of the team to think you were totally lame, you just picked yourself up and kept going. Last year, Matt had fallen and actually broken his wrist, but he'd got up and kept running and never said anything about how much it had hurt till the end of the cross-country meet, after their team had won. Half the girls in her class had a crush on him after that.

One moment she was running, and the next the ground had gone from under her. She landed hard and awkwardly on her butt, a sharp, stabbing pain radiating down her left leg. For a moment, as she lay winded on the narrow path, she didn't think she was hurt. Even when she pushed herself up on her elbows and looked down, and saw the blood spreading wetly between her thighs, she simply assumed it was

her period, that her pad had leaked: *Oh, God*, she panicked, *everyone – Matt – will see!*

But almost immediately she realized that of course it couldn't be that – the pain was far too intense, there was way too much blood. And then suddenly everything started to blur. It was if she was at the bottom of a swimming pool, looking up through the water at a shimmer of white faces. Their mouths were moving, but all she heard was a distant rumble; she could only guess at the words. *Tourniquet*, she thought she heard, and *broken glass* and then, frighteningly, *femoral artery*. Mrs Caisse, the cross-country coach, pulled the cord from her tracksuit pants, and she watched, too shocked to speak, as her teacher struggled to tie it around Florence's thigh. Something – yes, broken glass – had sliced straight through her thick grey winter jogging bottoms; a bright geyser of crimson blood spurted from her leg, soaking her clothes and the ground and Mrs Caisse. She couldn't quite believe she had so much blood in her. So much blood coming *out* of her, and yet she was still alive.

She started to shiver, suddenly colder than she'd ever been in her life. Mrs Caisse told her she'd called 911, she just had to hang on in there, she was going to be fine. Florence could tell by the fear in her eyes she was lying.

The other girls – and even some of the boys – were crying. Several of them had thrown up in the bushes. Amy and Matt were holding hands, and she felt a flash of irritation that her drama had brought them together. *This is ridiculous*, she thought. *No one ever dies cross-country running.*

And then: *I want my Mom.*

And then nothing.