TELL ME NO LIES

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TO STEPHANIE, ELIZABETH, AND SAMUEL: THE SUNFLOWERS TO MY POTATO.

CHAPTER ONE

NORA

This is my confession.

Or as much of it as I can give. There are moments, and then moments built upon other moments, that no longer exist in my head. Spaces of time I can no longer fill with memories. Instead, I'm left with blank spots that I tell myself are unimportant—small parts unneeded to re-create the whole.

But I know that's not true. I know they're some of the most necessary pieces.

And I suppose, if I intend for this to serve as my full account, I should start at the beginning.

It's not where anyone thinks it is.

It didn't start with Garrett Packard's disappearance. It didn't start with the party he was last seen at. And it didn't start when Garrett began dating my sister.

It started in Mrs. Porter's office with a matching pair of essays.

It started with *my* essay printed with Garrett Packard's name at the top.

Could we explain this? Mrs. Porter asked, as if the explanation wasn't horrifyingly obvious. Garrett didn't even belong in AP classes. He barely deserved to be passing standard-level courses, given his intellect (as verified by *me* in literally every conversation we'd ever had).

And yet, Garrett *was* in AP classes and had done well enough to find his way into the top 5 percent of our class. A mystery.

Even so, had it been anyone else standing shoulder to shoulder with Garrett that day, our identical essays with bold red question marks slashed over their headings, I might've understood Mrs. Porter's need to ask for an explanation.

But it wasn't anyone else. It was me. And never in my life have I had to *cheat*. Certainly, if I *were* to cheat, it wouldn't have been off the likes of Garrett Packard. He once insisted narwhals were mythical creatures (even after being shown proof) and thinks the Oxford comma is—and I quote—"too much extra work."

Perhaps I should've been more deferential. Things may have turned out differently had I apologized to Mrs. Porter, told her I had no earthly clue how *Garrett Packard* and I just so happened to produce the exact same essay.

It's possible that letting the anger that filled my chest and crawled toward my cheeks govern my response was *not*, ultimately, in my best interest.

As best as I can recall, I crossed my arms, and the reply that sprang from my mouth was "I don't have to explain myself to you."

Mrs. Porter was under the impression I did.

Consequently, I found myself in the office of one Wilbur G. Wentville, Birmingdale High's esteemed principal.

I say "esteemed" with extreme sarcasm. And not just because he had a penchant for wearing short-sleeved button-down shirts with ties.

Mr. Wentville could've made the right decision. He could've looked at the pair standing before him—that would be me and Garrett—and known instantaneously who was to blame. Instead, he vacillated.

Why? Likely because this little conundrum placed him in a very

difficult position. Should he malign my name? By my junior year, I'd been in contention for admission to Brown—the school I'd set my path toward from the moment I understood college existed.

My record was impeccable. I ran the debate club, served as student body president. I took the highest-level courses and did regular volunteer work in the community.

The girl who appeared on the Birmingdale home page, smiling and organizing mock presidential elections, caring for abandoned animals at the shelter? That was me.

But Garrett Packard was only a sophomore when he became Birmingdale's star quarterback. Honorary son of every alum who never could decipher how to leave their hometown behind. The ones who packed the stands and made generous donations to ensure the sports program never suffered from tragic fates such as: a lack of merch featuring our mascot—the highly-unfortunately-named Stuey Stallion—or players having to *gasp* wear the same helmets as last year.

Praise be to the football gods.

All of this meant Principal Wentville would create an enemy no matter what his decision. And so, as weak men are wont to do, he refused to.

Instead, he ordered us to rewrite our essays.

In detention.

In detention, together.

It wasn't a matter of whether I was capable of such a thing. Of course I was. It was the injustice of it.

Even more than that, it was the inefficiency.

I'd completed that assignment and cleared it from my mental

task list. To redo it would be a duplication of effort for no benefit aside from placation of Principal Wentville's demands, which were born out of Principal Wentville's utter lack of spine, which in turn made my cooperation an act of aiding and abetting an act of cowardice. And the strike on my record? Unacceptable.

I had a *plan*. By age nine, I'd decided what my life would look like, and I *committed* to making it happen. Undergraduate at Brown. Ace the LSAT. Law school at Stanford. Absolutely crush the MPRE—honestly, an ethics exam? I excel in ethics. For instance, I know that stealing someone else's paper is wrong. And then, of course, is the bar exam, which only 60 percent of applicants pass.

I remain unbothered by that statistic. Odds have no better chance of stopping me than anything else.

And aside from one lapse—which I've vowed to never let happen again—there have been no deviations from the plan. And I was not about to let Garrett Packard force me to break my vow.

My fingers ached with the force with which I gripped the arms of the chair, all the words in my head assembling themselves into proper order so that I could put a quick and efficient end to the nonsense of the last twenty minutes, but then.

But then I took the briefest of seconds to survey Garrett. He'd undoubtedly support my rejection of Principal Wentville's ruling. How could he not? Limited intellect or not, Garrett Packard would have to be disgruntled by the implication he may have cheated. Whether I valued it or not, he *did* have a reputation to uphold. College scouts tended to take umbrage with cheating.

But it wasn't anger I saw on Garrett's face. His face, in fact, held no expression at all.

Curious.

More so, a thin veil of sweat graced the edges of his hairline, and when his eyes met mine, it was only fear that lingered there.

I wonder now, knowing what I know, if I should've taken pity on him in that moment.

Obviously, we both knew the truth: Garrett had used his relationship with Sophie to gain access to my essay.

He'd likely showered her with enough compliments to fill her self-esteem to the brim, leave her so drunk on them she wouldn't question when he left the room, disappearing a little too long. So she'd ignore that feeling that told her he wasn't quite as honest as he claimed.

Back when Sophie and I were little—two tiny blondes only a year apart—inseparable, our bond unflappable, wearing matching skinned knees and a history so tightly wound it seemed one had never existed without the other—people used to refer to us as The Linden Sisters.

We weren't Nora and Sophie. What use was it to call to us separately when we always came together?

I don't recall when that changed. When my blond turned dark and my thoughts peeled free. When existing as a single being began to feel like a noose fitted around my neck.

And so I tore at the bonds that joined us, rubbed at the threads until they frayed. When Sophie clung harder, I pulled further away, until we became Nora and Sophie and the world couldn't recall a time we'd ever been simply The Linden Sisters.

For that, I'm not sure she's ever forgiven me. But that was the role I was tasked with filling. From my earliest memories, my mother

was there, telling me there was no time for tears. Sophie was the one who cried. I was the one who was strong.

Be strong, Nora. It's my mom's voice I hear whenever emotion grips me. It was her voice I heard then, telling me to let Sophie go.

So I did. Even if Sophie didn't understand why. And I'm not sure she's ever filled the place I used to inhabit.

Ergo, her relationship with Garrett Packard is, at least in part, my fault. Despite everything, I'm the big sister. My job, as my parents used to say, is to look out for Sophie.

But what Sophie will never admit is that I freed her too. All the best parts of her—her infectious joy, her spontaneous spirit, the magnetic draw she holds over every room she enters—I would've drowned them all.

I *did* look out for her. I did the thing she couldn't, and I did it for her, perhaps even more than for myself.

And that's what stopped me from pitying Garrett that day. Because, you see, it would always be my job to look out for Sophie, and if Garrett Packard had something to hide, he was a threat.

Sitting there, eyes locked with Garrett, his so pleading I swore the hammer of his heartbeat pulsed through them—that was the precise moment I vowed to figure out why.

Why Garrett was scared. Why he was suddenly so desperate he'd steal an essay that was sure to get him caught.

That was the precise moment I decided to find all of Garrett Packard's secrets.