

Don't

“Don't tell mom and dad.”

She nodded her head. “Okay.”

I was never fit for being the older sister; the role model, the one siblings always complain about being compared to. When my younger sister Sarah was four, she brought a sick cat home and told us with full sincerity that if we didn't take it, death would. Mom and dad agreed of course because the act was oh-so generous, but eleven-year old me hated the feline. I despised how mangled the fur that covered its bony body was and how one corner of its ear was missing. It was ugly, and ugly was not cool. If anyone from school saw such an awful creature in my possession, I'd be stripped of my popularity. Sarah gave it a luxurious bath that night complete with rose petals and expensive French soap while I stood sulking in the doorway, watching her gush over the hideous cat.

“You're really gonna let *that* roam around in our house?”

Sarah frowned. “She's a cat Danielle, and she needs help.”

The next morning, Sarah's sobs echoed off the kitchen walls, waking up everyone in the house. Our parents consoled and reassured her with the usual “it's going to be okay” while I sat in the corner of the dining table, resisting the urge to smirk. Once my

parents left for work, I rushed to the washroom to apply mascara, despite not being allowed to wear makeup yet.

“You killed Lullaby.”

I turned around and rolled my eyes. “Is that what the thing was called?”

“You killed her.” Sarah’s voice shook with emotion and tears dampened her lashes.

“I didn’t kill it,” I said coolly, waving my mascara wand in the air. “I just maybe, *accidentally*, let it out of the house.”

There was a moment of utter silence before Sarah bolted for the phone. I raced after her and grabbed her from behind.

“Don’t you dare tell mom and dad!” I growled.

“Watch me.”

One minute my hand was in the air and the next, Sarah’s cheek was bright red. My palm stung. She looked at me, eyes as wide as saucers, and for the first time I saw fear written all over her face. She was scared of me.

“Don’t,” I repeated, breathlessly, “Tell mom and dad.”

This time, she nodded.

I grabbed my purse off the foyer counter and put my hand on the doorknob when I heard Sarah's timid whisper behind me.

"Where are you going?"

I swivelled around in my heels, hand on my hip and glared at her. Instantly, she shrivelled away like a dying flower.

"None of your business."

"You're going to the bar again, aren't you?" She asked. Once upon a time, Sarah had been a lion; courageous, outspoken, witty. There was no trace of that mighty persona left in her anymore, replaced by the cowardice and bashfulness of a mouse.

"So what if I am?" I was only fourteen but with the right make-up, clothes, and friends, I could easily pass for an eighteen year old. With parents who were constantly busy at work, I had become addicted to hooking up with older guys and getting insanely drunk. Often I'd come home, completely wasted, but not drunk enough to miss Sarah anxiously glancing at me, terrified of what her older sister had become.

"Nothing," She mumbled and began to retreat up the stairs and into her room again.

"Wait."

Her head snapped around, eyes hopeful, thinking maybe I'd finally stay home and help her finish her math homework or watch *Frozen* together for the millionth time

instead of making out with some stranger I don't know the name of, and taking too many shots. But I had to burst her bubble.

“Don't tell mom and dad.”

The light died behind her eyes. “Okay.”

Autumn had always been my favourite season. God would retrieve his paint set hidden beneath the clouds and splatter the leaves with hues of red, bronze, and bright gold. Every year an annual fall fest was held to welcome the changes in the wind and I'd spend the day adventuring with my closest friends, not giving a damn about anything else. But this year, I was forced to bring Sarah with me.

“I'm seventeen! This is my last year here before I graduate and move out!”

“Exactly, Danielle. That's why you're going to spend some quality time with your sister before you pack your bags,” My mom huffed as she sent us out the door.

I knew Sarah didn't want to tag along. She was terrified of me. But we had no choice so I shoved in her the backseat and we drove to the fair in silence.

I should have kept her with me. I should have watched her like an older sister is supposed to but I was blinded by the sense of power I had over her and the boy who I thought, at the time, loved me. I haven't heard from him since.

The day was supposed to be about embracing autumn, bobbing for apples and eating sweet roast corn while admiring the gorgeous fall view from the ferris wheel.

“Go on the bumper cars,” I told her. I left once Sarah got on the ride without telling her where I was going.

It started with a shrill shriek, and then crescendoed into a frenzy of screams. Everything played in slow motion as I froze, wondering what happened. I remember sprinting towards the source of the chaos, heart thrashing wildly in my chest as I realized it was coming from the bumper cars.

The ride was engulfed in a blazing fire that seemed to melt my skin even from meters away. I felt terror course through my veins as the ash and smoke filled my lungs, turning my calls for Sarah into dry croaks. My world was falling apart.

Just then, I saw a tiny figure emerge from the flames and a cry of relief escaped my throat. She looked up for a moment, staring me straight in the eye, before collapsing onto the cinder ground. “Sarah!” I yelled, tears pouring down my cheeks. Making a brief second decision, I raced towards her body lying on the ashen pavement, ignoring the suffocating feeling of smoke trapping me like a prisoner. Picking her up, I stumbled back out of the danger zone and placed her on a field of grass, far away from the fire. My bones ached and I felt like passing out but I pulled myself together.

“Sarah?”

No reply.

“Sarah!” I shook her body and ever so slightly, her eyelids fluttered open. She began to cough and wheeze, wracking up blood in the process. Crimson red now stained her white jacket, the one my dad had bought for her for her tenth birthday. Fire Truck sirens blared in the background.

“I’m so sorry,” I whimpered, my shoulders shaking with guilt, sorrow, and apologies I knew she’d never get to hear. She was my little sister. No matter how much I tried to deny it in the past, I loved her.

Surprisingly, she smiled. It was a weak smile, but it was the first time she had done so because of me in six years. Her hand trembled as she placed it softly on my knee and I nimbly touched her wounded hand. She had once resembled a delicate doll; big eyes, porcelain skin, and silky hair. Now she was tainted with blood and her limbs were burned beyond belief.

I wish I had treated her better. I wish I had let Lullaby stay. I wish I had watched *Frozen* with her for the millionth time or helped her with her homework instead of going out to a bar because that’s what older sisters do. I wish I had bought her birthday presents or looked after her at the fall fest.

And as I cried tears that endlessly fell, I wished, out of all wishes, that I hadn’t slapped her that day and demanded her to follow those five simple words because the last thing Sarah ever said was,

“It’s okay. I won’t tell mom and dad.”

