

I have always been the one to protect my sister.

I protected her when she was in fourth grade, standing down the bully who used to steal her lunch. I protected her when she was in seventh grade, yanking the hair of the girl who kept writing *slut* on her locker. I protected her when she was in eighth grade, lying to Mom and Dad when she stayed out all night. I protected her when she was in ninth grade, hiding the fact that she stole my homecoming dress money, working an extra shift to quietly earn it back. Every time my parents kicked her out, I found her and brought her home. Her behavior and her attitude kept getting worse, and each rescue got harder to pull off, but I never gave up. She'd been my best friend since she was born, and that never stopped mattering.

She was so cute when she was little. No one could stop gushing about her, our parents least of all. She was the focus of every dinner party; old ladies in grocery stores called her an angel; strangers would start conversations with her when she'd peer at them over the backs of restaurant booths. She was the spotlight sister, and I was the shadow sister. She started adventures. I cleaned them up once they became disasters.

She'd always been easily distracted, and as soon as she started school, the diagnoses began. ADHD, that kind of thing. Before then, my protectiveness had been fierce and uncomplicated. I told her I'd do anything for her, and her face would get all serious and she would solemnly repeat

the words back to me. But a cold little barrier went up once doctors got involved. She was still the same sister I'd loved so much, and I still knew instinctively what she was thinking, but I stopped knowing what she was feeling. She was just as fiercely a part of me, but I was dazzled by her. I turned from an older sister to one of those mother cats you see raising a puppy, stubbornly blind to the core differences and exhausted by a creature she's driven to help and yet can't understand.

In the beginning, the drugs she took were all prescribed — until my parents thought the psychiatrists were overdoing it and cut back. That's when she started buying her own. At first, she got more of the drugs she'd already been taking, the ones she hoped would make her normal. Then she started buying any drug that made her feel good. And with these new drugs came new friends and new disasters.

She slammed her car into a light pole. The police found her partying in a construction site late at night, high out of her mind. When the school threatened academic expulsion, I vowed to find her a tutor so she could get her GED. I lied to our parents about where she got the wad of rolled-up bills they discovered in her messenger bag. I kept quiet when she pawned the china our grandmother had left our parents; they wouldn't know it was gone until they tried to set the table next Thanksgiving. Every secure thing she pried up in our lives, I quietly followed behind and glued it back down.

I might have been able to protect her forever.

Until Jefferson Andrews showed up dead.