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Lani Young

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# Don't Tell

## **Abstract**

'Don't tell or I'll kill you,' he said, his breath hot and wet in her ear as he covered her mouth with his huge hand. 'Don't tell or I'll kill you,' he said, emerging from the shadows, grabbing her from behind as she bathed in the outside paipa. 'Don't tell or I'll kill you,' he panted, as he crushed the breath out of her and did his bad things to her in the stifling darkness of her mosquito net.

LANI YOUNG

## Don't Tell

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She told her mother. Her words tumbling over each other. A desperate pleading for help as she struggled to voice the shameful words. Her mother slapped her face. Hard and horrified. Calling her a bad girl, a dirty girl for telling such evil lies.

She told Manu, her best friend at school. Eyes wide and shocked, Manu asked lots of curious questions. What was it like? What did he do? What did she do? Relieved to have a sympathetic listener, she poured out every twisted feeling and hurt, replaying every filthy scene. She even showed her the bruises on her arms and legs. She cried, quiet, gulping sobs as they sat behind the girls' toilet hidden from the rest of the school.

The next day Manu didn't speak to her. She sat next to Vise instead and at lunchtime, a group of twittering girls gathered around Manu as she spoke avidly. They all sent horrified glances Sina's way as she sat by herself under the pulu tree eating a topsy. They walked past her after school with hushed whispers and furtive sideways glances. The next day when Sina went to the toilet there was her name written on the bathroom wall — 'Sina is a paumutu' in bright red vivid marker. She threw up in the bowl and sat there in the leaky stinking silence until long after the home time bell had rung and all the children had left.

She told her favourite teacher — Mrs Esera, after she was found for the fourth time hiding in the girl's toilets after 4 o'clock, unwilling to go home because HE would be waiting for her. Mrs Esera took her into her classroom and asked her surprisingly tenderly, what was the matter? Hesitantly, slowly, the words came out. Painful phrases and heavy pauses as she stared at the dusty floor. The air was heavy and stifling in the classroom and a fly buzzed aimlessly against the screen wire. Mrs Esera looked shocked. They hadn't covered this in Teacher's College. She didn't know what to say. She told her go home and everything will be alright. Sina was almost happy that night under the mosquito net when he came to her fumbling with his lavalava. She lay still and silent as he

did his sweaty, grunting business. She looked at the stars outside and thought — this will be the last time. Tomorrow, everything will be alright....

Mrs Esera told the Principal. The Principal — fresh from an ‘Awareness of Domestic Violence’ course, immediately called the police. During recess, a white double cab with four police officers pulled up in the dusty schoolyard. A swarm of hot, cheerful children in red pinafores clustered around abuzz with curiosity. The police spoke to the Principal — a round man, importance bursting the buttons on his sweat-stained shirt. Together they conferred with Mrs Esera. Sina sat alone under the pulu tree and watched in shock, her forgotten topsy a melting bright orange on her skirt, as the group of officers, escorted by the Principal walked up to her. They put her in the truck clutching her faded Britney Spears backpack from Auntie Lanu in Amelika. A policeman sat on either side. As they reversed out of the schoolyard honking busily at the horde of fascinated schoolchildren, Sina shrunk back against the seat and started to cry.

The police told her mother. They called her at work. She came at once to the station still wearing her bright yellow ‘Molesi Supermarket’ t-shirt. She sat there tight-lipped at the desk as the police detailed what they knew. She turned angry eyes on Sina, her beaded dangly earrings jangling as she shook her head. She gripped Sina’s hand tightly, her yellow ring cutting into Sina’s fingers. She asked the police if they were sure that a young girl like Sina might not be making up stories? To cause trouble? To get attention? To make trouble for her stepfather because she didn’t like the way that he fasi’d her last time she was cheeky to him? Her shoulders slumped dejectedly when they told her that ‘no, a doctor has examined your daughter and she has signs...bruises...’. The interviewing room was silent as her grip on Sina’s hand loosened and she swept a tired hand through her hair. What would she do, she asked? We live with my husband’s aiga you know, and my own family — they live kua and they rely on my paycheck. Ioane, he is a good man who take care of us she said. Where would we go she asked. The police brushed past these questions. Her concerns were not their concerns. Charges would be laid they told her, her husband would be arrested. Her mind busied ahead of them, wondering, wondering fearfully what her husband would do and say when he found out. What would her mother-in-law do and say when she found out? How would she deal with the problems her daughter had brought them?

Sina went to stay at her auntie Mina’s house because the courts dictated that a victim couldn’t stay in the same house as the defendant. She had to miss school for a term because her mother didn’t have enough money to pay her school fees. Everyone in the aiga was chipping in to help pay for Mr Ioane’s lawyer. Her Auntie Mina had nine children — all of them older than Sina, and happy to have someone new to run their errands and do their feau’s for them. Especially someone as quiet and pliant as her. Every night she would cry silent tears under her sheet and pray again and again that her mother would forgive her and come for her. Some nights she would wake from terror-filled nightmares to find that she had wet her sleeping mat. Her Auntie Mina had a heavy hand

and the fat on her forearm would jiggle vigorously as she slapped Sina and called her a 'little moepi' for wetting her bed.

Sina didn't want to tell the fresh-faced lawyer from the Prosecution anything. She hung her head and kicked at the leg of the table. The lawyer was a pretty young woman, just graduated and eager for her first case. She spoke to Sina in English and used big words that she didn't understand. Sina was fascinated to notice that her toenails were painted coral pink and exactly matched her new-from-The Bodyshop-sale suit. She cleared her throat a lot and wrote many things down on her notepad. The minutes dragged on. She kept repeating the same questions over and over with Sina just shaking her head and wiping her snot on the back of her hand. Finally the lawyer called for refreshments. Over a coconut bun, sweet and rich, and a cool fizzy Fanta, the lawyer assured her that she just needed to be open and honest about what had happened with her step-father and then all this would be solved and justice 'would be served'. Sina didn't want to 'serve justice'. She just wanted her stepfather to stop doing bad things to her and her mother to be happy with her again. Desperate to go home, she finally told the lawyer all she wanted to know. She relayed the details in a dull monotone, as she stared vacantly out the window at the rubbish blowing on the sea wall. The lawyer was triumphantly thankful as she shook her hand goodbye. 'Don't you worry Sina,' she said cheerfully, 'everything will be fine!'

Mr Ioane told the judge he was very sorry for what he had done. He pleaded guilty and everyone was impressed with his sincerity. He explained that he had been 'unable to resist temptation'. Perhaps it was a medical problem he hinted? Restitution had been made he assured the court. A grand apology had been presented. No less than six whole pigs, ten pusa apa's and fifty fine mats had been offered and accepted, by Mrs Ioane's aiga in Falealupo. A murmur rippled through the courtroom — oka! A more than generous contribution towards reconciliation. The man must truly be sorry for the shame he had brought on himself and his aiga. He knew he must be punished for his sins he said, and he promised the judge he would never do it again. Mr Ioane looked very humble and repentant as the judge read out his sentence. A hint of wetness glistened at the corner of each eye as he hung his head.

Mr Ioane was sentenced to 6 years in prison — a landmark sentence at the time for child sexual abuse. The judge said that it was time to take a stand against what was becoming an increasingly common problem. It was a terrible thing Mr Ioane had done, he said, and he must be made to pay for his crime. The lawyer from the Prosecution threw a huge V-for-Victory smile in Sina's direction. Her triumphant red puletasi edged with gold brocade, swished around her clicking heels as she leaned over the table and thanked Sina for being such a 'star witness'. Her perfume made Sina sneeze.

Mr Ioane's mother and sisters wailed loudly as he was taken away to Tafaigata. Every day they took turns to bring him home-cooked meals so he wouldn't have

to eat the sua falaoa that the prisoners were served. They took home his washing tied neatly in a blue and orange lavalava, and his mother would lovingly press and fold each article of clothing. Every evening at family lotu, his grandmother would pray loudly for her grandson's spiritual welfare and for everyone to have forgiving and loving hearts. After six months, he was allowed weekend leave on a regular basis like many of the other prisoners. Mrs Ioane's forgiving and loving heart welcomed his visits. She reassured him many times — everything will be fine....

The Ioane family decided it was better for everyone if Sina stayed with her auntie Mina permanently. 'You are a lucky girl to have such a loving auntie who wants to take care of you,' they told Sina, 'you will be much happier away from your step-father and of course his family don't want you around anymore — not after all this bad business'. Mrs Ioane gave her sister an extra \$20 every payday for her Saturday bingo and Sina became another ragged child in a busy dusty household.

The Principal got promoted to a key position at the Education Department. He would tour the village schools and give very important presentations on 'Helping to prevent child abuse'. Mrs Esera was recognised for her ability 'to forge a rapport with the students' and became the new Headmistress. She was very busy with her new duties.

Sina told her auntie she didn't want to go to school anymore. She didn't like the way the other kids looked at her and talked about her. Auntie Mina was glad to have one less school fee to pay. Sina stayed home and made salu to sell outside Lucky's Foodtown instead. One Friday afternoon, Sina's V-for-Victory lawyer drove up in a air-conditioned car. She didn't want to buy a salu. Her perfume made Sina sneeze as she swept past.

Sina's friend Alietta came to see her several months later. She was crying and couldn't stop trembling. She needed advice. She was confused and afraid. 'My cousin — he came to me last night,' she said. 'He did bad things to me. I tried to make him stop but he wouldn't. He threatened to hurt me if I tell anyone. What should I do Sina?' she asked.

Sina looked her straight in the eye. Without hesitating she said — 'Don't tell. Don't tell anyone anything. Ever.'

## GLOSSARY

Paipa: tap.

Paumutu: slut.

Fasi: to give someone a beating.

Pusa apa: boxes of canned goods, usually herrings.

Salu: broom handmade from the coconut tree.

Sua falaoa: bread soup.