I would clarify, to begin with, that he had been much more than a teacher and, whether he had taught Science, math, history, or writing is pointless to indicate anymore. All of it, unnecessary details, would only boil down to a cheap broth of re-lived awkwardness for everyone involved who is around to experience it. But, since many insist on knowing those details, they must first ingest the truth in the allegory. Love *is* sometimes a complication. Note, I didn't advise that it was complicated, because that would imply that there was a bit of dominion involved over the situation. Exactly how much power does a fifteen-year-old have over anything anyway? (The same that a twenty-eight year old has, obviously.)

His house seemed too large for him. It had an octagonal turret room on the eastern side, framed in wide windows that let the sunlight flood in whenever the curtains were drawn. He seemed to spend most of his time there in the open, never giving a second thought to his privacy. A wrap-around balcony encompassed the second level, impeding the growth of a cluster of unkempt climbing rose bushes that ambled along the lower casements and clogged the gardens below. He never fought them back into submission; they were allowed to invade the yard as nearly wild creatures. For some reason, the structure itself didn't discourage the ivy either, which grew nearly everywhere there happened to be mason work, but those roses refused to continue beyond the base of the mezzanine. It was as if they respected the venerable ivy – or perhaps feared it. Fear and respect can be considered reciprocal much of the time.

I could survey him quite plainly from my Wednesday vantage point (in his neighbor's tree,) but having never exchanged a word with him, my imagination had no alternative but to invent him over and over again over the summer, well before I appreciated his true profession. Or rather, before I had his true profession flung at me somewhat violently. Occasionally, he noticed my encroachment and dispensed a polite half-smile, and after equal compensation, I would venture back down to the bare ground, fulfilled for the week, his advance sufficiently clinging to my unsophisticated naiveté.

What does one say about a first love, however inconvenient? Had he been a simple crush, my story would be brief and half-steeped in the mysteries of childish puppy love and hero admiration, half the tears of disappointment. But the entire situation became more a story of discomfort, broken promises, and crushed hearts. I take my blame equally. I had, after all, broken his heart as well. He still breaks mine.

On Mondays, my mother worked for the Kellers'. Tuesdays were for Gene the beautician. Wednesdays, my mother was at the Millers', which was the only day I would typically go with her. Their stately home was on the proper side of town; it was a large historical Victorian with a murky basement and a perfect little herb garden. Wood floors were almost always the rule for homes of this age, but I distinctly remembered glossy Italian marble for the foyer. I felt out of place in the house, almost like my presence would surely spoil the finish on the handrails. My solace was within the limbs of the elm tree in the side yard, a well-kept gargantuan with perfect boughs and sturdy branches. I didn't care to watch my mother clean the homes of her clients and stare at their cold possessions, and I'm sure she appreciated not having to worry about my mussing up her work.

His first words to me were sudden and unexpected. I had been laying in the tree watching the relatively still neighborhood as usual; my favorite target was not home, so instead I amused myself counting the pets running about the neatly-fenced yards. I wondered if he also had some sort of pet, perhaps a cat to keep him from loneliness, since I'd never seen anyone visit him. I saw his car pulling into the drive before he looked into the tree and saw me. It made me wonder if perhaps Wednesdays when I wasn't in the tree was cause for him to wonder where I was. I didn't expect for him to have a passenger, but she jumped out of the car before he did, heading straight for the door with her very own key.

Both went into the house with a level of impatience, reeking of some sort of joy that was suddenly very annoying. I decided not to watch him anymore, and focused my attention on the other houses, other yards. . . Brandi Malone practicing cheerleading a few yards away behind her perfect privacy fence. I noticed she had a pool—in ground. I hated Brandi Malone.

"Why are you always sitting in that tree?" the voice startled me. I turned to see that the object of my interest had opened the window closest to me. I lost my balance and nearly fell completely out. "Hang on. Don't move; I'll come down."

"Don't bother," I mused. "I can see that you're busy." With that, I slid down against the trunk skinning the inside of my thigh in the process. I bit my lip to conceal the pain, but he knew I had hurt myself. I landed on my feet and headed back toward the house without giving him another glance. Mom made me stand in the kitchen to keep from getting blood on the furniture.

"Why do you climb that old tree?" She asked. "You're really too old to be acting like that."

"I like it." I tried to pull my shorts down a bit to cover the abrasion. "I can see the world from that tree."

"You need to stay out of it," she complained as she washed my leg with an icy washcloth as if it was a piece of old furniture. "You don't need to be looking at the world. I'm only going to be here for another hour. Do you think you can stay out of trouble for sixty more minutes?"

"I can go to the square if you like. Do you have any money?"

"No, maybe you should go out and sweep the patio." The Miller house was encompassed by a large patio made with ruddy, thick pavers. A couple of years prior, Mr. Miller had decided to enclose the patio behind a masonry wall. He had only finished half of the job when his heart gave out. Mrs. Miller had found him with his face fixated in the cement. No one ever finished the wall.

I took the "outdoor" broom onto the patio, my intention to sweep, but my mind kept straying back to the house next door and what was happening within its walls. He was probably fucking her already. She had obviously been his girlfriend, but how serious was it? (*Obviously very, as she had a key.*) I wondered if my mom would let me stay home on Wednesdays from now on. The thought of him entangling with *her* repulsed me.

I didn't notice that he come around the side of the house to check on me. "Are you okay?" he smirked. "Looks like that really hurt."

I tightened my thighs, hiding the scrape from his direct view. "It's alright. It's just scratched. Kind of burns, that's all."

"Let me see," he was soon close enough that I could hear him breathing. He gently touched the side of my leg with the tips of his fingers. I parted my thighs and turned my leg very slowly so he cold get a good look but kept my view averted from making eye contact. "You should put something on that. It looks awful."

"I'm okay." It felt as if his touch burned through my skin. "I've had worse."

"I feel bad. I didn't mean to scare you. We just never spoke, and I wanted to find out what you were doing."

"You didn't scare me. Don't flatter yourself."

"I didn't? Ah, I see. You jump out of trees all the time." Realizing he was still touching my leg, he pulled his hand away, offering half a smile. The sunlight hit his eyes and turned them into prisms of cracked crystal.

"I didn't jump out. I slid down. I have to go."

He nodded. "Next Wednesday, then?"

"Why don't you have anything hanging on your walls," I asked him from the tree a week later.

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"I guess I don't like anything too permanent. It's disappointing when things fall apart. How's your battle
scar?"
"It's fine. It bruised a little, but not too badly."
"You're not wearing shorts today. I can't see it."
"I wouldn't show you even if I was wearing shorts."
"Maybe I wouldn't look then."
"You know you want to."
"Do I? I'm old enough to be your father."
"You're not that old. My father retires in a few years."
"How old could you be? Seventeen?"
"I'm eighteen."
"Then why are you in a tree and not sitting in class listening to your college professor?"
"I happen to like trees. For your information, I'm here only because my mother works here."
"And you don't have a job?"
"I'm a writer."
"And you're up in a tree watching people. . ."
"I have writer's block."
"I'm glad."
"Glad I have writer's block?"
"Yes, I would be very lonely for me if you weren't in my tree. I think that old tree looks forward to
cradling you every week."
"Your tree? I thought it belonged to the Miller's." I sat up abruptly.
"Afraid not. I guess you're trespassing. That's illegal you know."
"Fine! I won't climb up your old tree anymore."
"Oh, I hope that's not true. I figure my tree would get awfully lonely if you didn't visit."
"You can always have your girlfriend climb your old tree. She seems like she'd like it."
"She has to work. Besides, she doesn't like trees. At least not as much as you do."
"What do you mean?"
"Well, Stephanie is a lady, all business and substance. She has no time for trees, so the tree gets so lonely
and neglected . . . that is until Wednesdays when you come along."
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"Are you sure you're talking about the tree?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nevermind. I guess I'm glad too."

"Glad for what?"

"Glad your tree likes to see me on Wednesdays."

The next Wednesday, it rained. I tried to catch a glimpse of him from the upstairs windows of the house, but I never did see him. The Wednesday after that, I was babysitting my cousin who was in from Ohio. By the third Wednesday, the view inside his house looked almost alien. There were several prints on the walls, and he had hung long floral curtains. He didn't come to the windows to look through them at all, but I could see him working in the turret room. I even went so far as to eat my lunch in the tree just in case he wanted to talk to me. He didn't.

That night, I was determined to forget him, but thinking that way hurt. I felt an ache all the way from the tip of my left hand fingers to my heart. I knew it had to have been a crush that I felt for him, and the truth is, I wished I never had met him. He was in my thoughts almost constantly, and I had begun to miss seeing him to the point I didn't think I would have ever been the same. It was difficult to fall asleep that night, as I kept wondering if I would ever hear his voice again.

Carrie, a friend who lived in town, (I lived in the country) decided to invite me to spend the night one weekend before summer was over, so I decided it might help to get out of the house; She and I would talk about the boys at school and listen to music. I decided not to talk about *him* though. Carrie would have found the whole thing disturbing. At least at Carrie's, I didn't have to think about him in the emptiness of my room. I packed a duffel bag full of comfy clothes and mom dropped me off without argument, happy that she and my father would have the evening alone. I almost didn't think about the fact that Carrie lived three streets away from my crush. I truly did not expect to see him jogging by.

Carrie had decided that we needed to get a little sun, so we were laying out front on a blanket in short shorts and tank tops. He smiled at the two of us he passed. "Looks like your thigh healed just fine. You can hardly see the scar. How far does it go up?"

"Who's that guy?" She demanded. "He's cute. Old but cute."

I nearly leaped through my skin. "Carrie, I'll be right back. Please don't tell my mom."

"You're not leaving," her mouth gaped open as she spoke, "Don't tell her what?"

"Oh nothing," I chuckled nervously, "My mom knows him. He's a friend of the family. I need to ask him something."

"Just be back before mom gets off work. I've got to get a shower."

"I promise." I headed down the sidewalk, nearly tripping on the crevice between two slabs. My sandals slapped the soles of my feet as I headed toward him.

"What's on your mind?" He slowed so I could catch up. "Everything okay? Find a new tree or something? I haven't seen you much lately."

I walked up to him carefully. "Are you mad at me? It's okay, I just wanted to know."

"Of course not," he stopped suddenly. "What would make you think—"

"You seem different."

"I've been working. I don't have time to sit and talk to you all day long," he grinned. "I have a job, you know."

"Thing is, I didn't. I mean, I assumed you did, but . . . I thought you liked talking to me," I sighed and turned back toward Carrie's. "Sorry for bugging you."

"Wait," he grabbed my arm at the wrist, "I would like nothing better," His hand slid down my arm toward my hand as he pulled me closer. "But not on the street."

"Not what?" I pulled my hand away and gave him a puzzled look. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He rubbed the sweat from his forehead, "Can you come over tonight? I need to talk to you about something, preferably after I get a shower."

"First, you don't have time for me. Now, you want me to come over just because you ask me to. What if I'm busy? I may have a date."

"Do you?" His expression changed. "I mean, of course you do."

"No," I half whispered. "But why do you care?"

"Don't be like this."

"Like what."

"A child."

I glared at him. "If I'm such a child, maybe you should just leave me alone so I can grow up in peace."

"I'm sorry. I don't know how to explain this. I mean, we're in trouble. You and I both know it. I can't get you out of my head. I have a feeling it's the same for you." His expression was serious. "We need to figure all of this out. That is, if you want me as much as I want you."

I felt my eyes well up. "I will be there tonight. I promise. Three hours."

"You're late." He smiled down at me. He was waiting in his tree, one leg swinging back and forth along the bough. "Why didn't you drive by the way?"

"Carrie and I had a fight," I grasped the limb and climbed up toward him. "Sorry."

"What about?"

"You." I said softly.

"What about me?" In the moonlight, his eyes seemed to shine even brighter.

"She knows I have a crush on you. You know it too, and that is why you wanted me to come here tonight, isn't it? You wanted to let me down easy after telling me that stuff on the sidewalk today. You want me to stay away."

"What would give you that idea?" He carefully climbed across the thick bough to get closer. "You can't stay away from me. The thought alone probably nearly kills you."

"I have to." I sighed. "I'll be okay. I just have to get over you. . . be sensible. Besides, it doesn't nearly kill me. It just stings."

"You can't stay away. You can't get over me, and besides, I need you." He kissed me deeply on the lips: the very first kiss I had ever experienced. "Please don't abandon me. Not after I finally found you." I looked up into his eyes and felt mine mist over in tears. He smiled sweetly and brushed my tears away. "Don't cry. You'll make me cry. You strange impish creature . . ."

I shook beneath his touch. "I need to tell you something. . . ."

"There's someone else?" he whispered against my cheek. "I couldn't bear it."

I thought about telling him the truth, but I couldn't do it. Not on this perfect night. "Nothing like that. . . I think I'm in love with you. Is that even possible?"

My mother was less than thrilled to hear that I had left Carrie's that night. Her voice quaked as she spoke. "Carrie told me you left last night." *I hate Carrie*.

"We had a fight," I explained.

"Where did you go?"

"What do you mean?" I wondered exactly what Carrie had told her.

"I can't suffer your reputation. I won't be able to get work. You know this."

"I'm still virtuous, if that's what you're wondering," I said softly. Barely. He slept on the couch.

"That doesn't matter," she said. "A lady doesn't meet with boys at night. No matter how innocent you say it was. You went to a boy's house, right?"

"Boys?"

My mother nodded, "Carrie told me you met up with some teenage boys and you two went to a party with them."

I love Carrie. "I'm sorry, Mom. There were girls there too."

"You need to be careful. You're not even in their league. Remember that."

"Yes, Mom." I immediately called Carrie and we patched things up. I promised to tell her everything. I didn't.

The following Wednesday, I took my sketch book to the tree with me. "Are you ever going to come in here and see what I've done with the house?" he said through the window.

"I prefer the tree," I faked a yawn and let one leg dangle off the bough. "It's comfy. I can see you put a picture up on the wall. Big deal."

"You're kidding, right? Do you know how much I want to climb through this window, grab you, and drag you in here with me?"

"Haven't you realized that you've never invited me in," I pointed out to him. "You never asked me."

"Maybe I should come out there again," he mused. "I think I prefer the tree as well. Maybe you love that tree more than you love me."

"My mom is in that house over there, and I think it would kind of freak her out to see some strange guy in a tree with me."

"I think she'd like me," he said. "I'm a good guy."

"I don't know. She's really judgmental. I don't want to talk abut that right now. Let's drop it."

"Why don't you want to introduce me to your mom? Is it the age difference? I'm sure she won't think it's as bad as you do," he smiled.

I didn't want to lie to him anymore, but I couldn't tell him the truth. "You have no clue," I explained. "She's very old fashioned."

"Are you worried I'll treat her different because she's a maid?" He asked. "I'm in love with her daughter. She'll be okay with that."

"You're what?"

"I'm in love with you," he offered a genuine smile. "I had to tell you."

"I don't know why I told you I was falling in love with you," my head was spinning. "You don't really know me."

"My heart does. Come down from the tree."

"I . . "

"Please come down. I have to hold you."

I jumped down before he could track where I had gone. As he stared out the window, I stole my way up his back yard path and through the kitchen door. On the table lay several photographs of me in the tree, taken before I had even noticed him. I had never noticed him taking any of them. I stood barefoot in his kitchen for a few moments before he sensed I had come in. "You came in," he said softly behind me, nuzzling the back of my neck. I turned toward him, and he kissed me gently on the lips. "It's always been you," he whispered against my ear. "I love you so much."

His hands began to explore my body slowly as if he was trying to memorize every curve. I echoed back fragile responses to his touch. He then scooped me up and carried me into the living room, deeply kissing me hard on the mouth as he dipped me down onto the couch. For a moment, he stopped to look into my eyes and judge my expression.

"What is it?" I smiled nervously.

"You're shaking. Are you afraid?" He asked. "Am I your first?"

"No," I lied.

"I'm making you nervous. You look like a frightened bird."

"I'm not afraid. . . but yeah you're my first."

"Are you sure you want to?" he kissed the side of my face. "It's okay if you don't."

"I want to," I told him. "More than anything. Don't stop."

"I will be gentle with you. I promise."

I could consciously notice my heavier breathing. "Have you?" I interrupted between kisses.

"Not like this. I don't want to talk about it. It doesn't matter anymore."

"Why not?" I pulled away and looked into his eyes. He looked intoxicated.

"Because from now on, there is no one but you. There never was. Only you," he whispered against my face.

I heard my mother calling me before he did, which jolted me back from the drunkenness of his lovemaking. She had a sharp way of screeching out my name. "I have to go."

"Please stay."

"She'll be mad at me – and you."

"She'll understand," he assured me.

"I have to go. She'll catch us." My heart nearly leaped through my chest as I pulled my hair into a ponytail and tried to catch my breath.

"Is she religious or something?" I slid my pants back on and started buttoning my top. "What are you so afraid of?"

"I have to go. Please understand. I don't want you to get hurt. You're going to hate me anyways."

"What's the worry?" He threw on a t-shirt and ambled after me. "Settle down. Your heart's racing. I'm not going to hate you."

"Go to the front door," I instructed him. "And whatever you do, don't tell her I'm in here."

My mother was knocking as I slipped out his back door and headed toward her from the fenced yard. "Have you seen my sketchbook? It fell out of the tree," I called toward him.

By this time, he had gotten composed and answered my mother's knock with friendly hesitation. "Hullo," he offered a smile. "Can I help you with something?"

"Sorry, I'm looking for my daughter. I wanted to see if you might have noticed where she had gone," my mother explained.

"I'm here," I said softly, waving my sketchbook in the air.

"I'm sorry to have bothered you, sir," my mother explained. "What is with you, I've been calling you for an hour?" she asked me.

"I know," I sighed, "I was trying to find my book."

"We have to get to the school. Sophomores get their lockers today." He opened the door wider and stared at my mother with a puzzled, awestricken look. "We're sorry to have bothered you, sir. My daughter is a mess sometimes."

"Your daughter has been climbing in my tree," he choked out the words. "I'm sort of worried she'll hurt herself."

I felt my heart sink. "I'm sorry, sir."

"Don't worry, she starts school in two weeks, so she won't be in your tree anymore."

"I'm sorry," I repeated, clenching the tears back in my eyes.

"So am I," he sighed. "You have no idea how much."

"Looks like no harm done," my mother remarked. "She found it. Let's get you to school and get home before your Dad needs his dinner."

I mouthed the words "I love you" to him before I turned away. His eyes were misty, and somehow I knew there would be no way to fix our situation. The last thing I saw was as he closed the door. I think he was watching as my mother and I drove away but I could not bear to turn toward his house to see if I was right.

I avoided going to the house after that day. I made excuses on my two last Wednesdays of summer vacation to avoid it. I started hundreds of letters to him, but they never sounded right. How do you apologize for such a horrible crime against someone you love so entirely? I had hoped that school would offer some relief from my guilt as I would stay busy enough to keep my mind off my love. I was ready to return to the grueling schedule that would hopefully help the wound from driving me insane and welcomed the familiar site of the cliques and outcasts in an epic battle to simply survive the school year. My first day went well until the second to last period, when I realized I would have to face my summer heartbreak every day that year.

As I sat in class patiently waiting the arrival of my teacher, an ill feeling rushed over me. I felt him suddenly, and stronger than I had for weeks even before he entered the room – my love, and he was even more shocked to see me. We pretended to be strangers, but I felt his every gaze on me as one of cruel contempt and complete love in the same moment. I excused myself from class, likely to his relief, and went into the girls' room to throw up.

The next day, I learned there had been a change in my schedule, but it wasn't taking me from his class. It was thrusting me closer to him. I had volunteered to help out with the Science department during study hall, but too many volunteers for that unit had been named. I had been reassigned to help the teachers upstairs, and effectually I was to become his assistant during my study hour.

"What are we going to do?" I half whispered to him when we met in his office that afternoon. "I can't do this – work so close to you and not touch you. I am so sorry. You have no idea how sorry I am."

He half choked. "I'm not mad at you."

"You agree we have to end this arrangement right? If I'm your volunteer helper, it would be way too hard. It's hard enough already sitting in your classroom."

"I'm worried that if we try to change this schedule again, someone is going to figure it out."

"They're going to figure it out anyway. There's no way that anyone in the world isn't going to be able to tell that I am in love with you."

"Not if I'm cruel to you. Crushes happen every day," he sighed. "Do you think you could. . ."

"Take it?" I said, "Do I have another choice?"

"I can't lose my job right now. You know that, right?" he put his hand on top of mine but then jerked it away quickly as if burned. "I just don't know if I can keep this up either way. I can't think when I'm close to you." He put his head in his hands and sighed, and I felt the weight of my crime against him press me down. I wanted to hold him close and make the ache alleviate, but I felt panicked and paranoid that someone would see through the slender window on the office door.

Another teacher passed by and peered in. I made an instinctively defensive face. "I don't care what you think, sir. I won't spend all my time in the copy room. If you want your copies made, have another volunteer do it for you."

"I don't know why you were paired with me, but if you want the volunteer credit, you're going to have to have a better attitude."

The other teacher walked on, and he grabbed my hand again, placing a kiss on the palm. "It's a gift. We can still be together."

I pulled back from him and intently gazed into his eyes. "It's going to be worse than never seeing you again."

It started out as helping him grade quizzes and tests, and soon I was assisting him with other duties. I took to my job very seriously so he had more time to concentrate on teaching. I brought his coffee in the morning and checked with him every afternoon before I got onto the bus. The other teachers were so impressed with my attention to every detail, they recommended me for a citizenship award. They had no idea that I would have done anything for him.

In addition, he encouraged me to wear certain types of outfits. His favorite was when I'd wear a sweater and short pleated skirt. I'd sometimes part my legs during class so he could look while he was teaching. He always grinned appreciatively. One afternoon, we had found a moment alone in the office, and I felt suddenly very afraid I would be unable to control my emotions.

"I want you to know something," he said softly. "I'm not mad. I never was. It's not like you could help it."

I sighed. "I'm glad. I'm so sorry."

"I still love you," he concluded. "You already know that."

"I hoped," I corrected. "I still love you too."

"I want you to transfer next semester. I've actually already set it up. You're going to be in the class of one of my friends. It will be okay."

"Why?"

"Remember the other day? You were wearing that white sweater and the gray argyle skirt."

"Yeah."

"Did you wonder why I never got up from my desk?"

"Um... oh."

We were interrupted by one of his colleagues. "You want to grab dinner after you finish up?"

"I need to give a makeup test to a couple students, so I'll have to pass. Maybe tomorrow?"

"Sure," he chuckled, offering me a wink. "You should consider oral makeup tests this early in the semester. They're faster."

"That's a great suggestion."

I started volunteering for after school tutoring at his suggestion, and when there were no students to help, I would spend time in his office. When the tutoring got cancelled, I started volunteering with the choir and band. . . anything to stay after school and spend a few minutes with him. We started to take more risks since I was no longer in his class. He would hang a suit over the glass on the office door and press me against it as we kissed.

"Soon the weather will be too warm for a coat," I sighed. "What then?"

"I think your mom is starting to suspect," he offered one day. "There's no way she wouldn't know. You're starting to smell like me a little. I can detect a hint of my cologne in your hair."

"She doesn't. Mom doesn't notice anything."

"You have to promise me this is going to go somewhere. I can't have you leave me when you figure out I'm nothing."

"You're everything, but . . ."

"But what?"

"I'm afraid for you."

"I'd go to hell and back to be with you. You have to know that. You're almost eighteen – just three years and we can be together. Nobody can stop us then."

"What if someone finds out? What if you lose your job or go to jail."

"I don't care. I'll go to jail," he laughed. "And when I get out, you and I will be together."

"But your career will be over. I can't ruin your life," I sighed. "You love teaching."

"I love you," he said softly. "Teaching is my job. It's not who I am. You are my life."

His friend came in, which cut our conversation brief. "You still on for racquetball?"

"Yeah I'm almost done here," he smiled.

"You work that girl too hard. She's a student, not a slave."

"She likes it, don't you?" he grinned, poking me in the side.

"Yes," I whispered.

"Look, you've worn her out. Man, I'd love to get me one of those. I need to go cruise the study hall."

"Listen, Greg. I'll be heading out in thirty minutes. I need to give her a ride home," he explained. "Then we'll head to the gym."

"Be careful about that kind of a thing. You don't want rumors."

"Me and a student? You've got to be kidding," he laughed. I felt sick. "I'm into women not kids."

"Don't worry," I interrupted. "I have a boyfriend. I fuck him and everything."

He pretended not to hear. "How does he feel about this guy turning you into a slave?" Mr. Brady chuckled. "I bet he'd kick your butt."

"Oh, it's okay. My boyfriend thinks he's cool," I rolled my eyes.

I felt very strange getting into his car, and at first I didn't feel my body would do as I commanded. It was an odd sensation, and I felt very stiff climbing onto the seat. He reached around me and grabbed the seatbelt snapping it into place. "Where do you want to go?"

"Anywhere," I whispered.

"How long do you have?" the smile drained from his face. "We can't get caught."

"Mom expects me at the school around 6."

He shifted the gear selector, "Plenty of time. I want to show you something."

He drove me out to a wooded area. "Know where we are?"

"Shireman."

"I own these sticks. Can you believe it? Look at all the trees I bought for you."

"Can we get out and look around?" I felt a sudden rush of excitement.

I had felt nervous being alone with him after being so distant for so long. But as we walked deeper into the woods, the old emotions started pouring back. I felt warm tears sting my eyes as his hand slid against my bare shoulder. "Shhhhhhhhh let's not talk." He gave me a gentle kiss. "I don't want to spend another minute without your body against mine."

"I'm afraid for you," the tears poured down my face in streaks. "Someone is going to figure this out."

"And they won't know if they're right or wrong," he reassured me. "You've been such a good girl. I don't think anyone can get through you."

"Take me back to the school," my voice shook. "I won't do this to you."

"I don't understand. Don't you love me anymore?"

I kissed him deeply. "I love you. I have to protect you."

He stared at me for a moment. "I love you too. Damn it, why do I have to need you so much?" He kissed my forehead. "My brave, beautiful girl. I can't imagine how hard this is on you as well."

We returned to the school and I stumbled out of the car half-dazed. Behind us, his friend had pulled up, and as I went in the side door of the school I could hear them arguing. I prayed we had ended it soon enough, but I knew deep down we hadn't.

The next morning he wasn't at the school. When I went to the (deleted) office, only his friend was there, boxing up the contents of his desk. "I heard you treat your teachers special," he remarked. "But you've never showed me that much dedication. If you don't want me to talk, you have to treat me special too."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I reached behind me for the doorknob. He stood up and put his hand over mine and forced the door back closed.

"You think you're so smart, little girl? I know what you two have going on, and I'm damn sick of you playing innocent. Show me what a little slut you are. He won't mind."

"Please, let me go," I fought with the doorknob, sickened by the irony that my love and I had covered the window glass in the door with an oversized flag decal a few days prior. "I have to get ready for class."

"The only class you should be interested in is the one right here, right now," he growled. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"I'll scream," I threatened. "I'll scream and -"

"And I'll tell them what a lying little bitch you are. Oh, and your precious lover will go to jail. Nobody will believe you. Nobody."

"It's not like you think," I bit my lip. "I'm not like that."

"You think he loves you? Please. Every swinging dick in the teacher's lounge knows how you like it. He told us every detail. See, my buddy just loves conquering little bitches like you. You're not the first. You're not even special."

"You're lying." I fought against him, but he was too strong. When he knocked me down, my hip hit the tile floor, shooting pain through my side. "He'll kill you."

"Oh, I don't think so. You overestimate your value, Lolita."

I struggled to pull myself to a standing position.

"Perfect," he chuckled. "While you're down there. . ."

Suddenly, the door flew open. Like a madman, my lover grabbed his friend by the shoulders and threw him against the wall. The door slammed behind him, enclosing the three of us in the office. "Not a damn thing you can do to her." He whispered. "Let her go."

"Why? I'll have your contract?" he threatened. "What good will you be to her in jail?" She's just a piece of ass. It's not like you love her."

"I threw it away. I'm going back. I re-enlisted, so any crime I commit is the military's problem. You leave her alone or I'm going to come down on you hard."

"Who will pay attention to her when you're gone?" he grinned like a smarmy alley cat. "She'll be lonely. She'll be sucking my dick before you even hit the sand."

"She'll take care of herself. She's strong." He brushed a tear from my cheek. "Don't give tears to this."

"And who will take care of you?" his friend continued. "Maybe you'll find a good third-world whore to satisfy you the way this child could."

"I'm not worried about me. I want you to understand something very clearly. I have arranged to have her watched. I will know what you try with her, and I will go AWOL to murder you if you try anything else."

The tears lay warm in my eyes. I tried to find the words, but I couldn't speak.

"They are going to insist she answer for you. Only a few days left of this school year, but they still love a controversy."

"She won't say anything. If you're lucky, she won't say anything about you. Go. I have to take care of this." He pushed me out into the hall, which suddenly felt very cold.

I headed slowly out of the room, closing the door behind me, shutting the two of them in the office. I was later called to the main office asking if I needed to talk about anything. They indicated that the two teachers had gotten into an argument, and one had left, and they wondered if I knew why. I told them I didn't.

During my lunch break, I called my mother and told her that I was going to Carrie's after school and I'd have Carrie's mom bring me home. I cut class immediately and headed toward his street. I didn't want to confront him, but something told me I needed to. Unfortunately, he wasn't home.

When I climbed the tree to look into the house, I noticed it was empty. He had already gone, and I did not know where to even look for him. Instead, I lay still in his tree, listening to the world continue around me. Above, the sky was darkening and a storm had begun to form. I felt absolutely sick. My heart wished for the rain to come and cool my burning tears.

A deafening thunder clap woke me from my daze, as I soon realized that I needed to find shelter and leave the boughs of his tree. I leaped down and started toward the sidewalk, the rain pasting my dress against my skin. I heard footsteps as he ran toward me but was somehow convinced it was my mind playing tricks on me. He grasped my arm from behind and flung my body around, toward him. By this time, my wet hair was stuck to the sides of my face and neck, and the tears were no longer discernable from the pelts of rain. Breaking into sobs, I struck his chest with clenched fists and melted against his shoulder. He was still and sullen, his eyes hollow and tired.

"I'm sorry." He choked on the words. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You're leaving? How can you leave me now?"

"You have to be brave now. You have to be strong. I'll come back for you," he promised.

"You're lying. I know it," I gulped. He somehow knew it too.

"It's the best I can do. If I leave, you'll be safe. If I stay, they will take you away from me."

"Who will make sure you're safe?" I sunk to my knees in deep sobs. "How do I know you'll be back? Please don't leave me."

"I've never lied to you. I'll be back for you. I love you." He lifted me from the ground, and cradled me against his chest. "You're going to get sick. I'm taking you inside."

I simply nodded, my head swimming in ache as he carried me in from the rain. He set me down on the top of the chest freezer. "Let me get you a towel. You'll get pneumonia. I gotta figure out which box they're in."

I stayed still as a sullen doll, half in disbelief that this would be our last moment together in a long time.

He found a worn, clean towel in an un-taped box and started gently drying my face, but the incessant tears kept his efforts in vain. "I can't get your face dry if you don't stop crying," he chuckled painfully. The false laugh stuck in his throat. He kissed beside one of my tears and dried it. Then, he kissed another and dried it as well. Soon, his lips met mine, clenched in heartbreaking passion.

"I love you," I whispered to him softly, laying my head on his shoulder.

"I love you," he said. "I always will."

The next summer, my mother was working at the Miller's again when I found my way into the familiar boughs of the tree, his tree, to say goodbye to the man who had abandoned me. I knew he was not home; the "for sale" sign in the front left a raw feeling in my stomach. I stared at the floors through the open windows, envisioning him working in the turret room, glancing back at me to offer a final smile.

He had been buried as a hero that month, killed in a roadside bomb the week prior. I didn't cry when I heard about it.

I did not attend his funeral either.

It had begun to rain, and I felt the water splash against my face with a sickening rhythm. He had left me. He was gone. It was over. I wanted the water to cleanse my wounds of all the guilt, hurt, and pain. I wanted it to wash the ache away from my body, and I wanted it to mask the violent tears I could no longer hold back as I lay in the tree, his tree. . . which would soon miss me dreadfully as I abandoned it forever.