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Fifteen This December

The summer of Angie's eighth grade graduation, Jim kissed her at the neighborhood picnic. It was unexpected and exciting and unnerving all at once, but he pulled away so quickly, apologized, and left her beneath the canopy of secluded trees, far from the popsicle-and-watermelon-eating crowd. Angie's skin crawled as if chilled. Her mind spun with the wondrous surprise of his lips and the mystery of his retreat.

A landscaper, odd-jobber, Jim had failed out of community college and didn't follow through with his plan to join the Marines. He felt sort of lost, he'd told Angie under the trees at the picnic, picking at tree bark.

"I feel like that, too," Angie said. "And alone. I'm always alone."

"Come here," he said and leaned into her, pressed his lips to hers.

Now, Jim stood on the steps of her front porch, hands in his back pockets. He wore a baseball cap, backwards; red t-shirt, dark with sweat; dirty jeans and old sneakers streaked with grass. Jim removed his cap. Matted hair smeared his forehead. She wanted to wipe the hair away and kiss him.

He said, “Hey... So I was thinking, and I just wanted to apologize again for, for, you know, for what happened.”

“Why are you sorry?” she said. “I don’t get it.”

She wanted to add, “I liked it,” or “I wanted you to kiss me,” but there was no time to think; she could already see herself later, alone again, her mind swarming with the words she could not now say.

“Because it wasn’t right. I didn’t plan to do that. And you, you’re a sweet girl, pretty and all that. You’re just... you’re too young.”

“How old are you?” she asked.

“Twenty. Twenty-one this September.”

She was fourteen, fifteen this December. In five years, their age gap wouldn’t make a difference, but she wouldn’t say that.

“I think we should keep this between us,” he said.

What was *this*? It was as if he’d abandoned her beneath the cooling trees all over again.

“If I’m so young, why’d you kiss me?”

He closed his eyes and shook his head. “I didn’t want... You’re special. It doesn’t feel the same with other girls... the ones my age, I mean.” He looked down and rubbed

his sneaker on the crumbling front step. He tilted his head up, stared at the tree with the white blooms. "I think about you all the time."

Her chest felt thick. "I think about you, too."

He looked at her with sad, dark brown eyes. "I could get in trouble if we ever got closer. Serious trouble."

She could not still the pulse in her throat. She hugged herself tight with arms she wished were his.

Her mother, her only companion, would not be home for hours.

She recalled Jim's hands on her waist, his tongue in her mouth, eyes open.

Long before the picnic, Jim had picked her up from after-school tutoring in the spring, a favor to her mother. They sat in his truck and talked for hours.

He had bought her a Coke, as if they were on a date. She'd told him she was a math-idiot, and he gently touched her thigh.

She'd asked him, "If you could visit any place in the world, where would you go?"

"I'm not sure. My parents are German, so... Germany, I guess?"

"I'd go to Italy," she'd said. "I want to see all the art." She added, "You could come with me."

He'd smiled. "Definitely," he said.

Her face felt hot, but she did not look away, not then and not now.

As he stood before her on her front steps, she held his gaze until he smiled, revealing his crooked tooth.

He took a step forward, back, forward again.