

*Eden Falls, Vermont, May, 1965*

They dragged him from the ball field into the woods behind the school. His face was swollen and his body was covered with bruises. His new shirt, the one his mother had given him the day before, was torn and stained with his own blood.

He was eleven years old. He had been tormented, beaten, and humiliated. He was nearly unconscious, but he still felt the heavy rope being tied around his neck. The coarse fibers gripped his skin.

The older boys hooted and shouted their approval. They were all sixteen except one, who was older. His face was concealed by a black hood. He grabbed the free end of the rope and threw it up and over a thick tree limb. He held the rope and stared up at the limb.

The young boy lay on the ground. He was exhausted. He didn't protest the thick rope around his neck.

Suddenly the hooded boy put all of his weight into a mighty pull. The young boy's head jerked back and he was yanked to his knees. His neck was on fire and the pain in his throat consumed him. His hands gripped the noose and his fingers dug into his skin trying to get between his neck and the rope.

The other boys fell silent. The hooded boy gripped the rope high above his head and pulled down again, lifting his own feet off the ground for extra leverage.

The pain shot through the young boy's spine. His head felt as if it would explode. He kicked out to find the ground, but only the tips of his toes made contact. His lungs burned for oxygen. He kicked hard and he kicked again, and again.

One of the sixteen-year-old boys took a step backward, then another boy did the same.

The hooded boy looked at them, but he held his grip firmly on the rope. Then he turned to the young boy, leaned back and pulled down on the rope as hard as he could, drawing it into his abdomen as he pulled. He worked his hands up the rope and repeated this action three more times, each time more determined than before, until the young boy's feet were nearly five feet off the ground. The oldest boy looked at his friends who stared back in disbelief. The hood concealed his smile.

The young boy's protests became weaker as he fell into a semi-conscious state. His hands lingered on the noose around his neck until they gradually let go and fell to his side. His neck bled from the noose and the damage inflicted by his fingernails.

The young boy swayed from the tree limb as the older boys watched. His head stopped pounding and his neck no longer burned. He pictured his mother's face and he was sorry he had ruined his new shirt. He saw her smiling at him. He knew she'd forgive him, but he still felt bad. He remembered she had said he looked so handsome in the shirt, that the colors brought out the color in his eyes. He wanted to say something to her but he didn't want her to see his new shirt. He wanted her to put her arms around him, just one last time. He wanted her to hold him, and make the pain go away.

His eyes stared straight ahead, wide open. He was dead.