

SOMEONE

I WANTED

TO BE



AURELIA WILLS

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One

I talked to myself all the time. I pretended someone was listening and interested in my favorite color, what music I liked, and what I thought of Kristy. I told this listener, pulling thoughts and feelings out of the tangled mess inside me as I lay on my bed in my little room with puke-green walls decorated with posters of Bruno Mars, kittens, and puppies. Splotches of red dust grew on my window. Behind the yellowed glass were thick black bars and a window well full of garbage, dead leaves, and spiders.

I twirled the matchbook between my fingers. I opened the cover, smelled the peppery matches, and studied the name Kurt King and the number written inside in red ballpoint. His writing was small, tight, and jagged like lightning strokes. As he'd handed it to me, he'd said, "Tell her to call me."

I opened my phone and slowly pushed in the numbers, then held it to my cheek and stared up at a basket of black kittens with tiny pink tongues. I listened to the phone ring and waited in a cloud of nothingness, paper kittens, and an endless ringing. Then it stopped and a man with a hoarse voice said, “Yeah?”

The phone felt like a little bomb.

“Who is this?” he said.

TWO

Corinne and I went to Kristy's to get ready. Kristy's house had silky beige carpet like cocker spaniel fur. Seedpods and dried grass stuck out of a brown jug, and a shellacked wooden cross hung over the gas fireplace. Orange light shone through the smudged picture window that looked out on a cedar fence. Beyond the fence were the roofs of a hundred houses, every single house with a mountain view.

Kristy's dad sat in his recliner with his thick fingers curled under his chin. He tilted his head and stared dreamily at a cooking show on the flat-screen TV. He'd taken off his work clothes and wore a ribbed undershirt that stretched over his big soft belly. He was always tired—he worked at some job in the office park by the mall. “Kristy, Pastor Steve

is coming in twenty minutes. Do you want to come in and pray with us?"

"Um, Dad, I think we'll be gone by then. Sorry!" said Kristy, widening her eyes at Corinne.

Mrs. Baker hung on to the kitchen counter with both hands. She was wearing her footed toddler PJs with the zipper up the front. She looked like a giant baby chicken with a few tufts of gray hair like wilted feathers. "Girls, can I get you juice? We have flaxseed cookies."

Kristy rolled her eyes. "Mom, those cookies are disgusting." She shook out her hair, pressed her head against Corinne's, and whispered something. They ran laughing down the hallway.

Mrs. Baker wobbled over and put her arm around my waist. "How's my girl?"

"Oh, you know, I'm OK. What about you?" Her arm felt like a little branch, her hand like a leaf. She was the sickest person I'd ever known.

Mrs. Baker, this medicine will make you feel very sick for a few weeks, but afterward you will completely recover, I imagined telling her. I wanted to be a doctor but hadn't told anyone.

"Don't you worry about me." She weakly squeezed me with her leaf hand. Her eyes were so bright in that gray skinny face.

"Leah, get your big butt down here!"

Mrs. Baker wrinkled her forehead and raised her

eyebrows, or the skin where her eyebrows used to be. I could suddenly smell the cold, sharp medicines. She shook her almost-bald head. “She’s a pistol.”

“See you later, Mrs. Baker.”

She squeezed my shoulder with her little trembling hand. “You call me Mom.”

The walls of the hallway were covered with framed photographs of Kristy. Eight-by-ten school portraits in wooden frames, a baby Kristy surrounded by floating toys and bubbles in a blue bath, Kristy doing the splits in a leotard before she quit gymnastics, Kristy on her dad’s shoulders at Disneyland, the towers of the Magic Kingdom glowing in the weird black light behind them. Her dad, squashed beneath her, grinned and hung on to her ankles while she stuck out her chin and bared her teeth.

Kristy slammed her bedroom door shut behind me, then slid down it until she sat cross-legged on the carpet. She pulled her hair out from behind her and patted it like it was a pet. “Damn, those people wear me out. God! I can’t believe my dad asked me to pray with them.” She flipped open her laptop.

Corinne and I sat at the foot of her twin beds. Kristy’s parents had given her the master bedroom. The floor was covered in soft pink carpet. The comforters, curtains, and the skirt around the vanity were all done in matching fabric—a white background filled with fat roses. Kristy had taped up pictures of models and a giant poster of Lil Wayne, though

she didn't even listen to his music. Kristy's nose almost touched the computer screen. She typed something super fast and laughed.

Corinne pulled off her shoes and squinted at her toenails. "I don't mean to be rude, but there's something different about your mom's face."

I said, "God, Corinne, rude. Just rude." I would never have said anything.

"Her eyebrows fell off. Chemo." Kristy's eyes darted back and forth as she scrolled down the screen.

"Oh. Wow," Corinne said, and we both solemnly nodded. As a doctor, I would have to get used to this stuff.

Kristy looked up. She raised her own white eyebrow and dug her pinkie into the corner of her eye. She smiled savagely. "She's so skinny now, her butt's all wrinkled."

I felt a little sick at the thought. The waistband of my jeans was cutting into my stomach.

Kristy uncrossed her ankles and jumped to her feet. "I get first shower." She always got first shower in her pink-carpeted bathroom. Even the toilet lid had a fuzzy pink cover.

Corinne pulled the laptop over. She brought up a picture of her and Kristy with their heads tilted, mouths open, fingers pointing at their chins—gangsters. She rolled onto her back and yelled, "Kristy, that night was so awesome!"

I picked up an old *Seventeen*. On the cover was a picture of a girl with big shiny eyes and long shining hair and long

skinny legs like flower stems. A girl like a flower, but flowers couldn't talk. Flowers were quiet like me. The girl on the cover looked so happy, as if being perfect was all it took.

Kristy turned on the water, ripped the shower curtain down the pole, and started screeching a Beyoncé song.

Kristy was my girl—we'd been friends since junior high—but something white-hot like hatred for her ran through me like a nerve. Except for her mom being sick, she had a life like in a magazine. Her parents were still married, and they adored her. They bought her diamond earrings for her thirteenth birthday and a barely used red Civic when she turned sixteen. She lived in a house with ten huge rooms. It was practically a mansion. She had everything you could possibly want, but she still wanted more.

Kristy was beautiful, though she wasn't even pretty if you dissected her. She had squinty eyes with stubby white lashes and wore so much mascara that it clumped and flaked onto her cheeks. When she smiled, shiny pink gums showed above her teeth. She'd gotten her invisible braces off the year before.

She had a little face the size of a saucer, but her nose was substantial, a full-grown Italian-lady nose. She claimed to have a deviated septum, which would require a nose job when she turned eighteen. I could do a scarily good imitation of her whiny voice.

She wore little padded push-up bras and had red bumps, baby acne, on her skinny arms. But Kristy was tiny as a fairy,

and she had long, curly, white-blond hair. That hair did it every time. She'd get out of the car with that hair floating around her, and the boys were instantly drugged. I loved her and I hated her. She annihilated me. When she walked in the room, I disappeared.

I always told Corinne, "You're so much prettier than Kristy." And Corinne was, with her round cheeks and deep dimples. She streaked her brown hair, hid her freckles under orangey foundation, and wore green heart-shaped studs that brought out the color of her eyes. But there were a million Corinnes in the world, and Corinne knew it. This knowledge was like an arrowhead buried deep in her heart. It gave her eyes an icy glint and was the best part about her.

"Movie-star eyes and a movie-star mouth," Mrs. Baker always said about me. But I had rolls on my stomach and gigantic pale thighs. My hair and feet were OK, but it was like an erupting volcano of blubber in between.

I was like a princess trapped in a spell of fat. I was in love with Damien Rogers, a junior at Arapahoe High School. He was tall and dark-haired with a dimpled chin. We saw him almost every weekend we went down to Torrance Park. I'd talked to him once. I said, "Hi," and was almost positive that he heard me.

The bathroom door opened and Kristy burst out in a white terry robe with her hair in a pink turban. "Go!" she said. Corinne slowly got to her feet. Kristy's ironed size-zero

jeans lay on her bed. She'd let the silk conditioner in her hair soak for fifteen minutes.

Kristy grabbed her phone and leaned back against her lace-covered pillow. I sat on the floor. I leaned against the foot of her bed and stretched. "Can I use your laptop?"

Kristy said, "No. Chubs, you got to start waxing those arms."

I glared at her. She wasn't even looking at me. I pulled on my hoodie and thought about how his voice sounded. Kurt King. He slowed way down. He said, "I want to talk to you." His voice had gotten into my head like smoke, like a cat, and curled around me.

When we walked back through the living room, Pastor Steve was on his knees in front of the couch. He held Mr. and Mrs. Baker's hands, and they all had their eyes closed.

Three

Kristy pulled into the 7-Eleven parking lot.

“He’s here.”

He was standing out front, leaning against the brick wall. He was smoking and had one cowboy boot kicked back against the bricks. I was skewered, pinned to the seat by the sight of him.

He had long streaked hair with bangs that made him look boyish, green eyes, sharp cheekbones, and a mouth that looked like he’d just finished kissing someone. I wanted to put my hands around his narrow hips. He wore jeans torn at the knees and the corduroy jacket with the cheesy leather collar that he’d been wearing the first time we saw him. Corinne called him Mr. Corduroy. I was the only one who knew his real name. Kurt King.

Kristy ran her car into the curb, and we all jerked against our seat belts. One of the oldest kids in our grade, she'd gotten the Civic in September but was still a bad driver. By law she could only have one other kid in the car. She usually had two.

He took one last drag off his cigarette and flicked it across the parking lot. I was in the backseat. I always rode in the backseat when Corinne was with us.

"He's heading over," said Corinne in a singsong. She pulled the sleeves of her hoodie down over her hands and jammed her fists in her armpits.

Kristy unbuckled, lowered her window, sat up straight, and stuck out her chest. Her face was framed by a cloud of white ringlets. She was wearing giant silver hoop earrings and a tight lacy top she'd bought at the mall that afternoon. "Do we need cigarettes?" she said, when there were two packs sitting on the dash in front of her. She turned down the radio.

"He's here," Corinne said under her breath.

He stood outside Kristy's door with his arms crossed. He tilted his head to the side and squinted as if she were a car he was thinking about buying.

"Hey," he said with a crooked smile. He sucked in his cheeks like he had a mouthful of sugar.

Kristy spun around. Her mouth hung open in fake surprise. "Oh! Hey."

He braced himself against the door and leaned down until he filled Kristy's window. His streaky bangs fell into his

eyes, and he shook them back. His hands were brown and smooth except for the veins that ran like little snakes under the skin. His corduroy sleeves smelled like cigarettes and wind. His lower lip was swollen; his upper lip was thin and curved with a little dip in the middle. His eyes were dark-lashed. He was older than us, in his twenties at least. His face belonged on a magazine cover. He was the kind of guy you couldn't look away from—you'd try to look somewhere else, and your head would slowly turn back. I was the fat girl with huge thighs.

He said, "What's going on?" His scratchy voice made me feel strange and secret. I was barely breathing.

Kristy's shoulders swayed in a little circle to the song on the radio. Rihanna. She laughed for no reason. "Not much," she said.

He grinned as if she'd said something of incredible wit.

"Did you call me?" He pulled back a little and squinted at her. "Was that you who called me the other night?"

I was invisible. It was like being in a movie theater watching Kristy's life on the big screen.

"Uh, no," said Kristy, as she tried to shush Corinne. Corinne was poking Kristy with her elbow and whispering.

"Hey, would you do us a favor?" said Kristy. She twirled her hair around her fingers and widened her eyes. "I remember seeing you here last weekend. Would you maybe buy us some beer?"

Kurt King sighed, stood up, and stared across the parking lot. He slowly ran his tongue across his front teeth. He looked down at Kristy, then cocked his head. "Man, I hate it when kids ask me to do that. But I'll do it for you, sweetheart."

"I've got money," said Kristy. She stretched to get the twenty out of her back pocket, and Kurt King just looked her over and drank her in. It was kind of sick, and exactly the way I'd imagined Damien Rogers staring at me.

He crumpled the money into his fist. He had huge nails rimmed with dirt. "Pull around to the back by the Dumpster. What do you want?"

Corinne leaned over Kristy's lap. "Whatever's cheap. And get us a pack of Marlboro reds. OK, sweetheart?"

He gave Corinne a glassy-eyed stare, rolled back his shoulders, and swaggered over to the door. He jerked it open. For a minute, we watched him inside in the yellow light. Kristy started up the engine, and the Civic shot backward. She drove the car around the back of the store and pulled up next to the Dumpster. She yanked down the rear-view mirror, smeared on some lip gloss, then looked back to see if he was coming just as I leaned forward. She whipped me in the eyes with her hair. "How old do you think he is?"

"Kristy, you like him?" said Corinne with a little shriek. "He's old! He wears a stupid-looking corduroy jacket! He

has dirty hands! He highlights his hair! Mr. Corduroy is disgusting.”

“Corinne, shut up,” I said. “Mr. Corduroy’s coming. He’s right here.”

He walked up to Kristy’s window. He was wearing a belt with a big brass belt buckle engraved with a picture of a bucking horse. He scuffed his boot against the pavement and let us look at his bulky crotch and bucking-bronco belt buckle for a long minute. Then he shoved the case of beer through the window and tossed the cigarettes onto Corinne’s lap.

“There you go. Here’s your change. Now. How you going to thank me?” His face was still and serious.

Corinne set the case on the floor under her feet. There was a big light by the store’s back door, but by the Dumpster it was all shadows. Big blooming shadows like a garden of shadows, layers of shadows, all the different colors of shadow. Kristy sat motionless as a rabbit. She was shivering, maybe because Kurt King was drawing circles on her bare arm with his finger.

“What’s your name?”

Corinne jabbed Kristy’s side. Kristy put the car in reverse and the car rolled backward. Kurt King hung on to Kristy’s window and walked alongside.

“Girl, what’s your name?” he said. “I know it was you who called.”

“I got to go,” said Kristy. When she turned her head, I

could see her nose and her thin, glossy mouth through her hair. She was shaking with laughter.

“Thanks a million, Mr. Corduroy,” sang Corinne. She put her feet up on the dash and stuck her elbow out the window.

Kristy drove slowly around the store to the street. Kurt King walked beside the car, still hanging on to her window. His boots crunched against the asphalt. “I’m not letting you go,” he said, “until you tell me your name.” Kristy leaned back, laughed, and chewed her gum. Her eyes gleamed. I watched her in the rearview mirror.

Kristy stopped the car before she turned onto Tenth. “We got to go, dude.” She smiled to herself and pretended to look for something in her purse. “We got to go.” She shook out her hair.

Kurt King let go of Kristy’s window and leaned into mine. His big fingertips pinched the door. “Hey, quiet girl. What’s her name?”

His eyes, just a few inches away, looked steadily into mine. Warm breath blew against my cheek; it smelled like cigarettes and beer and something minty and dark and hot. I could have gotten drunk on his breath.

“Ashley.” That was the name I’d always wanted.

He put his big, dry hand around my chin. “Thanks, sweetheart.” My mouth brushed his palm as we pulled away.

Kristy and Corinne grabbed each other’s arms and shrieked with laughter. The car shot forward, spraying gravel,

and Mr. Corduroy jumped back. He yelled, "I'll be seeing you, Ashley!"

Kristy and Corinne laughed the whole way to Torrance Park. Besides the mall and the mountains, there was nowhere else to go in Hilton, Colorado.

Four

We drove down Torrance Avenue through Hilton's dinky downtown: brick buildings, a scabby park, one little skyscraper. Past downtown, the avenue widened into a four-lane road lined with lumberyards, warehouses, junkyards, fast-food restaurants, a couple of gas stations. The park was at the end, right before the road turned into a highway. Torrance Park had a concrete-block recreation center that was never open and a tiny basketball court with bent hoops. Other than that, there was just a stretch of weedy, thorny grass and a huge parking lot hidden from the road by a line of dark pines.

Kristy pulled into the parking lot, checked to see who was there, then backed into a space on the east side, where West High kids hung out. She sat sideways in her seat and started drinking Mr. Corduroy's beer. She was so small, like a kid in

a blond wig, but she could really put it away. She chugged a can and cupped a hand under her chin so the beer wouldn't run down her neck. Corinne curled in her seat, sipped beer, and watched the boys.

I sat in the backseat and played it all back in my head. How his voice had sounded when he said, "Thanks, sweetheart." I could still feel his hand against my mouth. Kristy twisted around and stared at me, then squawked with laughter and blew yellow streams of beer out her nose.

Some boys strolled up to Corinne's window. She lowered it and handed out cans of beer. "Dudes, we don't have that many! OK, one more." Corinne loved it when boys crowded around her like that. And the boys would gaze sweetly down at her—she was exactly what they had in mind for the night, just the ticket.

Then they'd look farther in and see Kristy and her hair, and they'd start to bristle and shove each other. And me? Their eyes would slide right over me and my thunder thighs all squashed in the backseat. That was fine. Nothing could touch me that night. I was in love with Damien Rogers, and a guy whose face belonged on a magazine cover had touched my cheek.

Kristy got out of the car and headed across the parking lot. Boys called to her and followed her like a swarm of bees. Some boy would say, "Hey, Kristy!" She'd turn around and yell, "What the hell do you want?" Then she'd stumble over,

and he'd put his arm around her and hold his cigarette or whatever he was drinking to her mouth, and she'd take a puff or a sip, protected in the curve of his arm.

Corinne and I got out and sat on the hood of Kristy's car. We lit cigarettes, unzipped our jackets to show off our tops. I crossed my legs so my thighs would look smaller. Our hair, perfumed by shampoo, hung in silky curtains around our faces. We both wore Kristy's rose-petal lip gloss and smoky mauve eye shadow. The night boiled with possibilities.

West High kids on the east side of the parking lot, East High kids on the west side, and Arapahoe on the south. In the nucleus of the parking lot, rich kids, athletes, and the extremely good-looking from all three schools partied. They laughed the loudest. Ray Ramirez, quarterback of our football team, was there without LaTeisha. LaTeisha Morgan would never hang out in a parking lot. LaTeisha got invited to house parties, where she drank Sprite and left early enough so that she could get up for church. Corinne, Kristy, and I were in the middle, but without them, I would have been punted to the dark edges of the parking lot where the stoners partied.

I wasn't wasted like Kristy, just drunk enough for everything to fall away—the long dead hours in the apartment, homework, the insults and degradations of school. Nothing existed but the night, beautiful shadows, laughter, boys, songs thumping from car windows. Corinne and I sat on the hood

of the Civic like beauty queens on a float. Corinne shouted to guys she knew. I kept watch for Damien Rogers. He was out there somewhere in the rippling crowd half lit by the smeary light from the streetlamps.

A Jeep pulled into the parking lot. Kelsey Parker whistled from the passenger window. “Corinne!”

Corinne grabbed my hand and made me walk over with her. The captain of the boys’ swim team was in the driver’s seat. He had a mean face and a bleached-out buzz cut. Both he and Kelsey were wasted. “Can I borrow ten bucks, Corinne? I lost my wallet, and Dean doesn’t have enough money. We’re starving.”

“Sure,” said Corinne. I stood behind her, breathed exhaust, and smiled stupidly. Kelsey and the swim team captain didn’t look at me.

Corinne handed over the money. “Thanks, sweetheart,” said Kelsey, already turning away. “OK, Dean. Let’s get out of here.” The Jeep backed up, then bumped over the curb into the street.

We walked back, weaving around groups of kids. Corinne and I had just sat down on the hood of Kristy’s Civic again when a boy said, “Oh, man!” and jumped back. Kristy had thrown up a big chunky puddle on the ground and plopped down next to it. Corinne and I slid off the car.

A football player with a shaved head squatted down next to Kristy. He put his arm around her and said he’d forgive her

if she came with him and his friends. She looked up at him through her hair and nodded. She was drooling.

Corinne pushed through the boys. “No way. She’s coming with us.”

We crouched next to Kristy. “Kristy. Kristy? Come on.”

The football player stood up and stretched. “Dumb bitches,” he said.

Kristy sat with her knees up by her face. She looked confused, like a toddler just woken up from a nap. I found a hamburger wrapper on the ground and wiped puke off her chin. Corinne grabbed up handfuls of her hair and wound it into a bun.

We each took an elbow and hoisted Kristy to her feet. She was wearing flip-flops, and her toes had puke on them. I stepped in the puddle and got vomit on my Vans. We steered her to her car and pushed her into the backseat.

Corinne tossed Kristy’s cushion into the back, got into the driver’s seat, and dug through Kristy’s purse for her keys. Corinne could drive a stick shift, though she didn’t have a license. “Damn it. She always does this.”

As we left the parking lot, Corinne’s head swung around. “Damien Rogers was in that truck.”

“What? Where? Do a U-turn, Corinne. Go back!”

Kristy groaned and hiccuped in the backseat.

“We can’t. She’s going to barf again.”

But Kristy didn’t barf on the drive home. She just lay in

the backseat, looking sweaty and sick. Her hair came out of the bun and stuck to her face.

We drove down Torrance Avenue through downtown, up into the foothills, past the spotlights at the entrance to Mountain View Estates, and down the smooth black streets. Corinne pulled to a stop in front of Kristy's house.

"I'd have her sleep over, but Derrick would go ballistic." Corinne's stepfather, Derrick, shouted all the time because he had too many kids. He wouldn't let Corinne go out for softball. He had a grizzled double chin and wasn't nice to her mom.

We tugged Kristy out of the car and led her across the sheet of lawn turned white by the streetlight. Kristy shrieked, shook us off, got down on her knees, then flopped on the ground and rolled onto her back. She lay on the grass with her earrings tangled in her vomity hair. She twisted from side to side and screamed, "No! No! Leave me alone, bitches!"

The front door swung open. Kristy's dad came out in his boxer shorts. His legs were like Popsicle sticks covered with dark hair, but he had a monstrous pale stomach with a huge belly button like a Cyclops's eye. His face was creased and red, and his hair was crazy like he'd just pulled his head out of a washing machine.

He marched across the lawn, got down on one knee, and shoved Kristy up in his arms. She cried and hammered on his chest with her fists. He held her still with one of his

big hands. He kissed her forehead. “Shhh, shhh. It’s OK, baby doll.”

Mr. Baker turned to us. “Leah, you’re spending the night, aren’t you? Corinne, do you want to stay over? No? Are you sure? Can you make it home safely?” He was calm and unembarrassed as a king as he stood there in his underwear with Kristy moaning and twisting in his arms.

I followed them up the steps into the bright light. In the kitchen, Mrs. Baker stood with her hands folded under her chin like she was praying. Mr. Baker set Kristy on a chair in the circle of light from a purple glass lamp. Kristy curled up in a ball with her arms wrapped around her knees. She rubbed her eyes against her kneecaps and made mewling sounds like a sick cat. Her makeup was smeared all over her face.

Her mom wet a towel, toddled over, and dabbed at Kristy’s eyes and cheeks. Her dad pulled a leaf out of her hair. He tucked a strand behind her ear.

“Now, Kristy,” said Kristy’s mom. Her upper lip quivered like she was about to sneeze. “We’re not angry—we’re just concerned.”

“I’ll just go back to Kristy’s room,” I said softly behind them.

“Brian, do you think . . . ?” said Mrs. Baker. She clutched the edge of the table and wobbled. They had forgotten that I was standing in the kitchen behind them.

I walked down the hallway to Kristy’s dark room. I pulled

off my shoes and jacket and slipped between the clean sheets. My head sunk into the cool, squishy pillow. The pillows at my apartment were lumpy from washing and stained a dark yellow.

Kristy's dad carried her in and laid her on the other bed. Her mom unbuttoned her jeans, and her dad pulled them off by the bottoms. Her vomity feet with fuchsia toenails lay on the rose-covered comforter. They pulled the sheet and comforter over her, smoothed the blankets, then took turns laying their hands on her forehead. She groaned and whimpered and batted their hands away.

They tiptoed out and left the door open. A wedge of yellow light shone on the pink carpet. Her dad crept back in and left a silver bowl next to her bed. I'd read in a first-aid booklet what to do if she puked—turn her on her side so she wouldn't choke to death.

The hall light shone all night long. Hours later, the phone began to ring. In my dream, I was in a submarine and the phone was ringing on top of the water. I smelled Aquafresh, opened my eyes, and found a bulky body leaning over me.

I jerked up. Kristy's dad said, "Shhh. Leah, it's Mr. Baker. Connie and I are making a quick run to the emergency room. I just wanted you to know what was going on. We didn't want to wake Kristy. You stay here. I'll lock the door. You'll be fine. We should be back in a couple of hours."

When I woke up, the late sun was shining on the carpet.

Kristy was asleep, a pile of blond curls buried in roses. I opened her laptop and looked at pictures people had posted. The night before. Damien had been with a girl whose hair was the same color as mine. They didn't look serious. I shut down the computer, pulled on my shoes, found my jacket and purse under the bed, and tiptoed down the hallway.

There was no sign of an emergency, no blood, no bandages strewn on the orange carpet. Kristy's dad was crashed on the recliner, his chin rising and falling with his chest.

I crept up. His face was creased and pouchy and sad. I had a weird impulse to comb the thin brown hair strung across his spotted head. His forehead was lined like an accordion from worrying. He wore a big silver watch on his hairy wrist. His breathing and the watch's faint tick were the only sounds in the room.

"I'm going home, Mr. Baker. Thanks for having me," I whispered. He snored and turned his face away.

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