



# A Hidden Past: A captivating psychological thriller with an astonishing twist

**Author:** *Blake Pierce*

**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** Nate Harlow is a seemingly average 19-year-old college student who takes on a summer job for extra cash. He expects to be skimming pools for rich families. He never expects to find a dead body.

As a poor kid from the wrong side of the tracks, Nate is already a fish out of water. And now he feels compelled to solve a murder.

But behind these gilded mansions lie secrets better left alone.

Or he may be the next one found floating face-down...

**Total Pages (Source):** 29

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

The subdivision is called Autumn Downs, a name I find particularly dumb. The developers probably thought it added an air of aristocracy, but to me it just seems stupid. As I wait at the security gate, I can't help but notice how fake-secure the community looks. The gate is unnecessarily big and imposing, but I know there are plenty of places around the perimeter where I could easily scale the fence in a three-piece suit without breaking a sweat.

"Hang tight, buddy," the security guard tells me. "Don't worry about this crap. You won't have to go through it again, at least not with me. In a few weeks, everyone will know you."

"Thanks, Man," I say gratefully. This "crap" refers to the process of getting approval to start my new job inside the community. Best Pool Service may not have a creative name, but they've given me exclusive rights to work in Autumn Downs. They take care of all the supplies and corporate stuff while I get a percentage off the top every two weeks and a profit share every quarter.

But first, I actually have to get inside Autumn Downs to start the work and earn my percentage off the top.

I enter Autumn Downs. Stupid name, but I push that thought aside. Forget the fact that "Downs" refers to chalk hills in England. It's still a dumb name for a subdivision. Who wants to live in a place called Fall Downs?

The security guard hands me a stack of papers, including my driver's license with a red band notifying that I have two more years before turning twenty-one. The band and the guard calling me "buddy" irritates me for some reason. I don't like how being

nineteen allows him to be overly familiar with me. He's not my buddy, and his attempts at camaraderie only make him seem more pathetic.

I put my ID in my wallet and hang the guest placard on my rearview mirror, hoping it will protect me from the golf-cart driving rent-a-cops. In my hand, I hold a stapled sheaf of papers, with LAUREL HEIGHTS VENDOR GUIDELINES written in bold letters on the top page.

The guard rolls his eyes and says, "Nobody reads that. Don't worry about it. But there's a map on the last page that might help you. The streets here are too new to be on all databases, so your navigator app probably won't work."

"Thanks again," I say, "but I think you gave me a different community."

"That's the idiots we've got living here, man," he says. "So rich they have to invent problems. The homeowner's association is trying to change the name. I think there's a Laurel Heights in Seattle or something, so some people don't feel as special as they want to. They made the sign before they had the votes, and now there's a big shitstorm over it." He winks conspiratorially. "Welcome to Moneyville, bud."

I whistle and say, "I guess."

I do that for show. This guy really needs to work on not being too friendly. On the other hand, exaggerated attitude or not, it's nice that at least one other person sees through the BS.

There are whole movies about this concept of suburbia. In those movies, something dark and sinister always lurks beneath the polish. It isn't just places like this, though, wealthy places. There are suburbs all along the financial spectrum, from the actually secure, double-gated communities where truly important people live to the slums that cling to life around the outskirts of dead cities.

They all have secrets. Families have secrets. And everyone is fighting like hell to keep those secrets from being revealed.

It's foolish most of the time. Most people don't bother trying to figure out the secrets hiding behind blue-grey exteriors with flat black trim. They're too busy wondering what other people think about them to worry about other people. And the ones who are supposed to discover the secrets, the ones who make a career of it? They don't care either. At least, they don't care past their job requirements. They make a token effort, and then apologize that the case is inactive.

I shake my head against the distraction of my thoughts. It's time to get to work.

I locate Vernon Court on the map. There are three client houses right in a row there. It's very close, actually, and it takes me next to no time at all to park and step out of the van. Heat assaults me the moment I step out of the vehicle's air conditioning. I feel it through the open window at the guard gate, but that's nothing compared to now. Today is a scorcher. It feels strange to have a reason to care about a heat wave. The weather has never bothered me before.

But then again, I've never had a job that requires me to work outside before. I've never really had a job before, not one to speak of at least.

I look around for just a moment. I haven't even met any of the clients, and I already feel out of place. As loudly as this place screams, "Look at us! Please notice how much better we are than you!" it also screams, "Look at you! Look at how unworthy you are!"

But I don't have any choice about things. I need the money, and I need a job with flexible scheduling. Especially during the summer when I can earn more money. When fall semester comes around, I won't be able to work as much. Fortunately, people will use their pools less regularly in the fall, so I'm confident I can balance

my studies with work.

Still, I can't shake the feeling that I'm being watched by hostile eyes, that the neighborhood itself is rejecting me the way the body would reject a germ. That's what I am to people like this. A germ.

I can feel myself growing angry, so I shake those thoughts free. It doesn't matter what I am to these people. They're paying me their money, and I need that money right now, so it doesn't matter how I feel about it.

I take a deep breath and walk to my first client's front door.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

There are times when I think of my home as small but clean. Not much but safe. Nothing special but still something to be grateful for.

I have all those platitudes to help me deal with a far more pressing and, I suppose, more obvious truth. Where I live is nothing like Laurel Heights. Damn, I wish the sign had been right and that the place really was called Autumn Downs. It would be nice to have at least a decent reason to disdain them now that I'm back home.

Laurel Heights is a plastic place filled with plastic people. The lawns are all perfectly manicured and kept that way by unobtrusive landscapers. I imagine they never run mowers or leaf blowers before nine-thirty in the morning. The place is filled with pools, and they're all pristine because they all hire people like me. The driveways are filled with cars kept shiny and new by detailers who come directly to the homes so the fine residents of Laurel heights don't have to go through the horrific inconvenience of driving for five minutes or—perish the thought—waiting for an hour while someone cleans their car at a shop.

But it's all the same. Every single house on every single lot is the damned same. Every car is the damned same, and everyone who lives in those houses and drives those cars is the same damned person.

I sit on the recliner and sigh as I sip a beer. The beer, perpetually on sale at the gas station down the street, costs me double because I have to pay the next-door neighbor to buy it for me. Even paying double, it's still cheap beer.

Jake's happy to buy beer for me. He's been buying beer for me since high school. Of course, by the time I was in high school, beer didn't do much for me. I'd already

found drugs. What was beer when there were pills available? Why bother with finding harder alcohol when a couple of pills gave me a better high and no hangover?

Actually, there were a number of reasons for me to avoid drugs but, of course, I didn't know that at fifteen, sixteen, or seventeen. It wasn't until I finally got caught that I started to learn. The judge made sure I heard the wake-up call before sealing my record.

I allow myself a moment of gratitude that all they caught me doing was boosting cars. There were a host of other crimes that could have gotten me more time if they had been able to pin them on me.

I wasn't a bad kid. I didn't do any of the thefts to get money for drugs. I did it just to get away from this place.

Of course, there's an old recliner in my room now. I would be sleeping on the floor if I hadn't driven by a mini-mall advertising twin mattresses for sixty-nine dollars. The sad thing is that mattress on the floor is probably the best bed I've ever had.

"Bullshit," I whisper. Things used to be better. There was definitely a point when my family went downhill. There was definitely a point when our house stopped being nothing special but still safe and clean.

Then, it had become, just as it was now, poor and hopeless. I scan the floorboards. The cockroaches are gone, at least. Evidently, the bug bomb and roach motels did the trick. It'll probably go to Hell again when I move back into the dorms when the semester starts, but that doesn't matter. With any luck, I'll be off the waitlist and housed in the dorms by the time next summer rolled around. I can still work the pool hustle that way. The summer classes are short, and I can save my easy classes for the summers so the homework isn't too stifling.

I sigh and toss my empty beer can into the wastebasket that I bought earlier that day for seven dollars. I don't bother with liners, just use shopping bags to line the bin. After adjusting the paper trash to cover the can, I instinctively check if my mother will come in and inspect my room. She'll probably be too drunk to care anyway. Not that I want to deal with her right now. It's always a battle to communicate past her drunkenness. All she'll try to do is get money from me.

I open my mini fridge, a parting gift from my roommate Trey who won't be returning next semester. There's also a small microwave from him on the four-foot table I use as a desk.

Trey was a talented football player but not quite good enough for the NFL. He got recruited by a semiprofessional team in Europe, thanks to his wealthy family. If it turns out to be a mistake, it won't really cost him anything.

Mistakes don't cost people who have money.

In any case, Trey's mistake means I have a mini fridge and microwave now.

I crack open another beer and notice the Buffalo chicken mac and cheese meal in the little freezer compartment. It's my emergency stash, so to speak. The official deal is that my mother receives four hundred dollars a month for rent and food. I operate under no illusions, though. I'm likely to find the refrigerator empty as often as not. I could probably force the issue by spending a hundred and fifty dollars on food every month and giving her the difference, but I don't need the drama. When I agreed to the amount, I knew I couldn't count on the food.

I put the mac and cheese in the microwave and drink the rest of my beer. A warmth starts to spread through my limbs, and I frown. I have to slow down. The beer isn't a problem, but if I get too buzzed, there are a lot of things at the bottom of a beer can. I can't bring myself to give up my secret "emergency" stash, but I don't want to



actually use it.

Alcohol is bad. Pills are worse.

But nothing compares to the needle.

I look toward the closet and allow myself the moment of longing I always feel when I think about the rig sill hidden behind the old plastic bins I use instead of a dresser. When that moment is over, I toss the beer can into the wastebasket and head to the shower.

I almost make it without running into Mom. Almost. I have my hand on the door handle when I hear the familiar and frustrating call of, “Nate? Natey?”

If there’s one name I hate more than buddy, it’s Natey.

I lower my eyes and have just enough time to sigh before the scent of vodka and cigarettes lets me know that my mother is approaching.

“Hi, Mom.”

“When did you get home? I didn’t hear you come in.”

Probably because you were passed out on the couch.

“About five minutes ago,” I lie. “You were sleeping. I didn’t want to wake you.”

“Oh. Have you eaten yet?”

That’s not an offer for food. It’s a precursor to asking me to buy food for her. “Yeah, I ate already.”

“Oh. Did you bring anything home?”

“No. I figured you’d be asleep. You usually are this time of the afternoon.”

There’s a trace of bitterness in my voice when I say that, but Mom doesn’t pick up on it. It’s hard to tell what Mom still picks up on these days.

“Oh. I was gonna see if you wanted to stop by Leo’s for pizza.”

Think of the dirtiest, grimmest restaurant you’ve ever seen. I’m talking the kind of place the roaches won’t even go. Leo’s is somehow worse than that. A place has to get pretty bad for pizza to be unappetizing, but Leo’s reaches that point.

They’re cheap, though. And they have an alcohol license. And they don’t ask questions when a clearly underage kid buys liquor and pays with cash.

I smile at Mom. “I’m good. Thank you, though.”

She looks at me, and irritation flashes across her face. This is the little game we play. She knows that she’s only asking because she wants me to buy her more booze. She knows that I know that, and that I’m being difficult right now because I’m forcing her to admit that.

And I know that eventually, I’m going to give in and go get her the damned booze because it’s easier than fighting a battle we both lost ten years ago.

“Well, I haven’t eaten yet,” she says. “You think you could use some of the money you got from your prestigious job to go get your mother something to eat?”

“I haven’t gotten paid yet,” I tell her. “My first paycheck won’t be until next Friday.”

Her lips twitch, and I have to admit to a perverse satisfaction at seeing her backed into a corner. I'll pay for it later, but now that I'm bigger than her, I'll only pay for it verbally and only until I decide to walk away.

"You have some money left from your last job, though, right?"

"I do."

"So can you buy me some dinner? Is that all right? Is it too much trouble?"

She grows louder as she speaks, infuriated that I've made her admit, even in this small way, how pathetic she is.

"Sure," I say. "Just let me shower first."

She reddens and says, "You can't wait fifteen minutes? You ate already."

"That's true," I say.

Then I open the bathroom and step inside. She turns the shade of an overripe tomato and opens her mouth to shout, but I close the door on her. She's far gone, but not far gone enough that she's going to barge into the bathroom and risk seeing her son naked.

As I shower, I think back to when it was good. Back when my father still lived here. Back when my mother was happy. Back when I was happy.

Back when Annie was still alive.

There are days when I'm grateful to have the good memories, days where I can look fondly back on moments where life didn't seem so horrible.

Then there are days when I hate that I wasn't younger when she died so I wouldn't have to think about how much worse everything is now that she's gone. Today is one of those days.

I take my time in the shower, not because I need to but because I want to make my mother wait as long as possible for her booze. Silly me. When I walk into the living room dressed and ready to go, she's halfway into a bottle of vodka.

She looks me up and down, then says smugly, "Wanted beer, but you needed to shower first."

I don't say anything. I just chuckle bitterly, then walk outside to get the pizza.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Day two is hotter than day one. The temperature gauge on the dash of the work van says ninety-five. It feels about ten degrees hotter than that.

I sigh and step out of the van to start work on the next house on my list. The client today is Vivian Chase. I don't really know why it matters that I know their names, but Best Pool Cleaners is insistent that I do. They want me to smile and show excellent customer service. That would make sense if our clients were middle-class people who desperately needed working-class people to defer to them so they could feel superior, but to the people of Laurel Heights, I'm not even a person. I'm a servant. The thought that I would do anything but defer to them never even crosses their minds. Do you have to ask a car if it's going to defer to you? No, you just drive it.

I laugh at that. I doubt anyone here drives their own cars. Anyway, whether the clients appreciate my attempts at politeness or ignore it, that's what my employer expects, and since I need this job, and it's one of the few jobs that fits my needs, I put a smile on my face and knock on the door with enthusiasm.

The door opens, and my enthusiasm changes to something else.

Vivian Chase is nothing like I expect her to be.

I have an image of the women in this neighborhood and others like it of all being in their forties and fifties with bad plastic surgery, fake tans and attitudes ranging from overly promiscuous to haughty and perpetually disgusted. I figure they're all the worst version of the California bleach blonde stereotype.

I don't count on meeting anyone as beautiful as Vivian.

She looks to be about twenty years older than me, give or take. That puts her near the age range I expect.

Everything else is different. The slight wrinkles on her face and the fact that her lips are the size of a human's and not massively stretched and plumped out of proportion tells me that she's not had any plastic surgery. Her skin is lightly tanned, but it's the healthy tan of someone who spends time in the sun, not the tan that costs five hundred dollars at Beach Dolls 'R Us.

When she smiles, it's plenty seductive, but I don't think a woman who looks like her could smile any other way. She's about five foot seven, which makes her six inches shorter than me. She has long hair that is blonde, but a natural darker blonde and not the frosted straw-color dyed look. The hair frames her face and draws my eyes down to another part of her body that I can tell is just as natural as the rest of her.

No surprises there. With natural assets that look like the ones she has, there's no need for implants.

My eyes fall to her hips, which curve gently over long, toned legs. When I catch myself looking up and down her body, I snap my eyes back up to her face.

That doesn't help. Remember those perfectly sized lips I talk about earlier? Well, they're soft and sweet and just slightly parted at the moment, and they rest under gray eyes that look like the sky the morning after a winter storm.

She's beautiful.

"You must be Nate," she says, and damned if her voice isn't as perfect as the rest of her.

Today might be a good day after all.

“Yes,” I say. “That’s me. Nathan Harlow, Best Pool Cleaners.”

She smiles slightly and extends a hand. “Vivian Chase, divorcee.”

And she’s single. Part of me wishes she wasn’t. It’s going to be hard enough to keep the fantasies at bay without knowing that there’s a chance I could fulfill them.

Get a grip, Nate. This is real life, not Real Housewives.

I take her hand and shake it professionally, then release it. “Nice to meet you. Is now a good time?”

“Now’s a great time. Do you want to come inside?”

She tilts her head a little when she says that, and it takes more effort than I care to admit to keep my eyes focused on hers. “I would love to come inside.”

She laughs, and waves her fingers, indicating for me to follow her. As she walks, I notice that there’s another part of her body that’s all natural and perfectly shaped.

“The pool’s out back,” she says. “Surprising, I know. It’s in fairly good shape. I had it cleaned a month ago, but since the weather’s warm now, I figured I should get it cleaned one more time before I spend all day lounging in front of it in a two-piece.”

Thank you for that image.

“I’m happy to help.”

She looks over her shoulder, and I feel a flush as her eyes move up and down over me. “I’ll bet you are.”

We walk into her backyard, and it's then I realize that I have no idea what the inside of her house looks like. I usually at least take a peek at the lifestyles of the rich and famous people of Autumn Downs. I might despise them, but that doesn't mean there's no part of me that wishes I could live like them.

But I'm too focused on Vivian to give much of a crap about the size of her tv or whether she has marble or granite floors.

"Here we are."

She gestures at the pool, and I see—with some relief—that it really isn't all that bad. There are some leaves, and a thin transparent film of gunk across the top, but it's not a swamp like the other houses I went to yesterday.

The pool itself is maybe four hundred square feet. That's fairly large, but as far as houses here go, it's on the low end of average. I should have this done in a couple of hours.

"Yeah, this shouldn't take too long. I'll go ahead and pour in the treatment now and let it sit while I replace your pool filter and clean out the leaves. That should take me an hour or two. Then I'll run the filter. You're going to want to give it twenty-four hours before you use it, but it'll be good as new by then. Who cleaned it last time?"

"A delightfully pleasant older woman named Maria. She was my cleaner for many years, but she has recently retired. That's why you're here."

"Well, I'm happy to be your new pool woman."

She laughs at the joke. I decide she must like me because that was a really bad joke.

Okay, time to get my mind out of the gutter. This is a job, not a date.



I sort of hope that Vivian will wait inside while I work, but she doesn't. Instead, she comes back out fifteen minutes later wearing that two piece she mentions earlier.

And God, it's unfair how good she looks in it.

I dated in high school. I mean, I don't know if you could call it dating, but I've had experience with girls. It's not like I'm a complete stranger to sex. Hell, even now, I can usually count on a few nights a month with one of the girls at school during the semester.

But Vivian is something else. She's not just beautiful. She's confident without being arrogant, poised without quite being regal, and mature without being... well, old.

I'm glad when I finish the job and I can get out of there. I'm treading dangerous ground right now. The last thing I need is to let hormones get me in the kind of trouble that could lose me my job and ruin my chance at getting out of Cudahy.

"All right, Miss Chase," I say.

"Vivian." She flashes me a smile that could melt Antarctica. "Please."

"Vivian. We're all set here. We have your credit card on file. No extra charges since this was pretty straightforward. You should get a receipt from us within twenty-four hours. Thank you for choosing—"

"Would you like a drink?"

I'd like a cold shower is what I'd like.

I hesitate before answering. I don't want to be rude, but I also don't think it's a good idea to drink around her.

“I have some lemonade in the fridge.”

”Oh. I mean, yes. Yes, please.”

Her smile widens, and she holds out her hand for me to help her up. My heart pounds, but I manage to keep from drooling as I lift her to her feet.

We walk into the kitchen, and she lifts herself onto her tiptoes to retrieve two glasses from the cabinet. I try not to think about what the movement does to the rest of her body.

Then she opens the fridge and bends over to get the lemonade, and yeah, there’s no way to keep me from thinking about that.

She looks over at me while still in the fridge, and I quickly turn away, cheeks burning. She giggles, and my cheeks burn brighter now that I know she caught me.

“So how long have you been working here?” she asks.

“Um, this is my second day.”

“Your second day,” she repeats.

She hands me my glass and says, “Who have you seen already?”

I sip the lemonade. It’s cool and refreshing and a perfect balance of sweet and tart.  
”Um, the Patels, the Van Huycks, and the Chos yesterday. Today, it’s you and then the Kensington.”

”Ah,” she says, ”The Kensington.”

Her upper lip curls slightly when she says that. Because I'm an idiot who is at the moment mesmerized by her very presence, I ask, "You don't like them?"

Instead of answering my question directly, she laughs and says, "I think you'll come to appreciate Laurel Heights. I don't know if you'll like it, but I think you'll appreciate it. The deception here is refreshingly honest."

My brow furrows. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"You will be."

I decide to leave that alone. We fall silent a moment, and I notice her eyes travel over me again. She's not shy about showing that she appreciates what she sees, but I want to remain about as far from the conclusion of that thought process as I can, so I strike up conversation again. "So you don't like the new name?"

"Autumn Downs? For a place with exactly zero downs? No, I can't say I'm a fan."

"Exactly!" I say. "Downs are hills. There's not a single hill here."

"Astute observation, Nathan."

I can't tell if she's teasing me or not.

"Of course," she says. "There aren't any heights around here either. So maybe I'm just a hypocrite."

She looks me up and down one more time. I finish my lemonade and manage a smile. "Well, thank you for the lemonade, Miss Ch—Vivian. I um... I should get to the Kensington."

“Oh yes. We wouldn’t want to keep them waiting.”

“Right. Um, thank you.”

I start for the door, then realize that I’ve left my equipment in the back. I head out to get it, trying to avoid Vivian’s amused gaze. When I head back through the house, equipment in tow, she says, “I hope to see more of you, Nathan.”

“I hope to see more of you too,” I say before I can stop myself.

I manage to get to the van and I even manage to get inside of it and pull out of her driveway before I release the breath I’m holding.

“Holy shit,” I whisper. “God, what a babe.”

Despite that undeniable fact, my last thought as I pull away from her house isn’t of how well she filled out that two-piece but the odd thing she said to me about Autumn Downs.

The deception here is refreshingly honest.

Then, when I told her I wasn’t sure what she meant, You will be.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

If Vivian Chase was nothing like what I expected, the Kensingtons are even stranger. Julian Kensington wears a veneer of politeness that carefully hides an even more carefully constructed persona of superiority. He greets me with a friendly smile, but his eyes are cold and hard as diamonds.

“It’s good to see you, Nate. I’ll have Clara show you to the pool.”

And that is the extent of our conversation.

Clara Kensington is beautiful but in a more stereotypical California bleach blonde way. Her plastic surgery isn’t terrible, but she hasn’t worn it well. Her face and body carry the telltale signs of someone who got hooked on drugs and alcohol too early and could never quite unhook herself. I’m all too familiar with those signs.

“Good afternoon, darling!” she says in the exquisitely manicured voice of a socialite. “It’s wonderful to see you!”

She offers me her hand, palm down, wrist limp, as though she expects me to kiss it. Instead, I shake it professionally, then release it. Her eyes widen and her lips tense slightly. Why she would care enough to be offended is beyond me, but I really don’t care.

“Okay,” I say. “If you take me to your pool, I can get started. It’s still early, so barring something unforeseen, I should have things wrapped up before dark.”

“Oh, I do hope so,” Clara says. “We’re expecting company tonight, and I’d love for them to be able to use the pool. It’s going to be a lovely evening.”

“Well, we do recommend that you wait twenty-four hours for the treatment to cycle,” I tell her.

She blinks, utterly stunned that I would ever suggest that she can’t have whatever she desires. “Oh. Well, that’s truly unfortunate. I was expecting the pool would be available for use once you were finished.”

“Jesus, Clara, you can wait one fucking day.”

Julian’s sudden vehemence shocks me. He looks at his wife with naked disdain. I can’t say I got a good first impression of the woman myself, but for God’s sake, that’s his wife!

Then again, I’m not a person. I’m just the pool cleaner. It doesn’t matter if he insults her in front of me.

She looks at him with a mixture of contempt, self-loathing, hate and despair that I’ve seen on the faces of every single wife here. In fact, the only happy woman I’ve met so far is Vivian, and she’s stopped being a wife.

Well, God, if this is how their husbands talk to them.

“Well, I suppose it’s all right. There will be other warm nights.” Clara laughs after that, an uncomfortable, harsh sound, like glass shattering on an aluminum countertop. “Come with me,” she says. “I’ll take you to the pool.”

She steps outside and leads me around the side of the house. The thought of allowing me into their home never even occurs to them.

I’m actually kind of grateful for that. I felt utterly out of place in Vivian’s home. Not to mention the fact that she was clearly flirting with me and I was a half-step away

from giving into that temptation.

I can't imagine a world where Clara Kensington could do anything to get me to give into temptation, but it's nice to be back into a familiar lane. I don't belong here. I'm here to do a distasteful job, then disappear as quickly as possible. That's how they like it, and it's how I like it.

"You're going to replace the pool filter, right?"

"Yes, ma'am. The service includes a thorough cleaning, filter replacement and water treatment."

"Oh, good. It makes this horrid rattling noise, and I just can't wait for it to stop."

I open my mouth to tell her that if there's a mechanical problem with the filter pump, I'm not going to be able to fix it, but I don't really want to have that conversation right now. I'll cross that bridge when I come to it.

So, I just smile and walk into the backyard. The pool is in worse shape than Vivian's, but it's not an unmitigated disaster. It'll take me about twice as long to clean this one, but it'll get done before the sun sets.

"It doesn't look too bad," I say. "I should have this all set by..."

My voice trails off when I look up and see I'm alone in the backyard.

"Yep," I finish.

I head back to the van and get my equipment. I'll need the vacuum for this one, not just the net.

I figure out the rattling noise in the pool filter pretty quickly. There's a pearl necklace tangled around the motor's chain. By some miracle, it's managed to avoid tangling itself in the actual chain and is just wrapped around the cylinder head with a few pearls laying against the chain.

I take it off and set it to the side. I'll take it in to Clara when I leave.

I take a moment to look at the necklace before replacing the filter. I don't even want to know how expensive that necklace was when it was new. Hell, even now, it's probably worth as much as the van I drive.

A thought crosses my mind. Clara will almost certainly just throw this necklace away and buy another one. This necklace, which is worth tens of thousands of dollars to anyone willing to take twenty minutes to clean it, will spend the rest of its existence in a landfill.

This could solve all of my problems.

I reach for the necklace, but I close my fist before my fingers wrap around it.

This won't solve all of my problems. It'll bring all of them back. I learned that lesson the hard way. I don't want to learn it again.

I replace the filter and get to work on the pool. I'll have to put the treatment in after I clean it. I'll just end up vacuuming all of the chemical out if I put it in now.

The sun is blistering hot, and I'm grateful for the lemonade Vivian gave me. God, I can't understand how people work landscaping in this heat. At least I'm working around water. It's not like I can just take a dip, but enough water splashes on me to cool me down a little bit. What if I had to be mowing grass and picking weeds like this?



I get most of the debris with the vacuum then take a break before I use the net. Best Pool allows me to take a single fifteen-minute break during the job, but they ask that I save my meals for in between houses. That's reasonable enough. It's not like I want to spend any more time here than I have to. I just need to take a load off for a second.

I catch sight of movement out of the corner of my eye. I make the mistake of following that movement to an open second-floor window.

My breath catches in my throat for the second time today.

The girl in the window is around my age. She is absolutely stunning.

It's a different kind of beauty than Vivian's. Vivian is all of the best stereotypes of an attractive, healthy older woman and none of the worst.

This girl is more like a specter. She's slender with skin so pale it's almost translucent. She has enough curves to look attractive, but her... um... assets aren't as well-developed as Vivian. They're proportionate to her delicate frame, though, and since she only wears a bra and panties at the moment, I see all but the most sensitive parts of that frame. Her hair is long and straight, a dark brown color that matches Julian's. Probably his and Clara's daughter. I don't get a good look at her face, but the side profile I see tells me that her features are as delicate as the rest of her.

Vivian Chase looks like the kind of woman you dream of having tell you what to do. This girl looks like the kind of person you want to protect and care for, the kind you want to hold in your arms and ensure nothing ever happens to her.

I look at her, and I feel a longing that I've never experienced before.

Christ, what is my problem today? I'm here to work, damn it, not fantasize about girls who are beyond off-limits to me. It would just be my luck if I do something

stupid and lose everything I've worked for before I even have a chance at a future.

I pour my energy into my work and finish the pool fifteen minutes early. I'm about to pack up and return the necklace to Clara when I turn and see the girl from earlier staring at me.

She's dressed now in sweatpants and a t-shirt that fits her well without being tight enough to be immodest. I get a good look at her face this time too. She's pissed.

"Why the hell are you spying on me?"

Oh, God damn it. "I wasn't spying on you."

"Yes, you were. I saw you staring at me through my window."

Oh shit. "I... I wasn't. I swear."

"Did you like my underwear?" she says cattily, "Was it slinky enough for you?"

This is it. This is the end of my job. This is the loss of everything I worked hard for. All because I can't stop thinking like a damned high school boy. I'm seriously going to lose my job because I was gawking at a client's daughter.

"I... I'm sorry," I stammer. "I didn't mean to..."

My voice trails off when she throws her head back and laughs. I stare at her uncertainly, and when she points at me and says, "Your face! Oh God, your face!" I am less than pleased.

Anger replaces my fear, and it's all I can do not to curse her out. Instead, I smile and chuckle slightly, hoping that's what she wants me to do. God, I can't wait to get out

of here.

“It’s okay,” she says. “I know you’re not a creep. It’s my fault for leaving the window open when I was in my underwear, anyway.” She looks at me and says, “Seriously, don’t worry. I’m not going to tell my parents or anything.”

“Oh,” is all I manage to say.

“What’s your name?”

“Nathan Harlow.”

She sticks her hand out. “Lila.”

I can’t help but notice how thin her arm is. When I see her at first, she looks slender. Seeing her up close, I wonder if there’s more to it than just slimness.

Not that I’m going to come anywhere close to acknowledging that.

“It’s nice to meet you, Miss Kensington.”

She smiles drily at me. “You’ve seen just about all of me now. You might as well call me Lila.”

“Oh. Um. Sure. Nice to meet you, Lila.”

She laughs and says, “I can see that I’ve completely terrified you. I’ll let you go without teasing you anymore. I have to go change for dance class, anyway. Seriously, don’t worry about catching me half-naked. Everyone spies on everyone here.”

She says that like it’s the most normal thing in the world. A part of me wants to ask

why that is.

Most of me is grateful to get the hell out of here. I stammer a goodbye, then refuse to look at her as I hurriedly pack and leave, even though I know she's still staring at me.

I forget all about the necklace. It's just as well. Let that be someone else's problem. It's not until I return the van that I left the pool vacuum there too.

Wonderful. I'll have to go back tomorrow and get it. God, what a shitty day.

As the fear subsides, though, I begin to regret running away so fast. Lila was pretty. She's not a supermodel type like Vivian, but in a way that makes her even more attractive. She has that cute girl next door look. And she has an incredible smile.

I should have asked for her number. Maybe tomorrow when I get the vacuum...

I laugh and shake my head. She might look like a girl next door, but she's not the girl next door to someone like me.

Still, you never know. Stranger things have happened. Maybe today isn't so shitty after all.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

I open my eyes, and I'm in Vivian Chase's backyard again. This time, she's not wearing a two-piece. This time, she's not wearing anything.

She smiles at me and spreads her legs. "Hey there, Nathan. Do you want to come inside?"

I look down and see that I'm also naked. A certain part of my body is very eager to take advantage of Vivian's offer.

The next thing I know, she's in my arms. I can feel her body wrapping around me, whispering in my ear, "Yes, Nathan. Oh yes. Just like that, baby."

She kisses me, and I feel a tremor run down my body. When she pulls away, she says, "Oh yes. You like that, don't you, baby? Does that feel good?"

"Yes, Vivian. Oh yes."

She giggles and says, "I'm so glad you let me see more of you."

She pulls my lips to hers again. Our movements grow feverish, and my heart begins to pound as we near the end.

"Hey, pool boy."

I open my eyes. I'm not with Vivian anymore. Instead, I'm in the Kensington's backyard. Lila stands in front of me. She's dressed in her underwear, and the sight of her like that is just as powerful as the sight of Vivian without hers.

She smiles at me and folds her arms over her chest. “If you’re going to stare at me like that, you might as well do something about it.”

I look down and realize that my body is just as excited as it was a moment ago. I look up at Lila, and she’s walking away, letting her hips sway and looking over her shoulder at me.

“Come catch me, pool boy.”

I run after her. She laughs and begins running, too. I nearly reach her when she dives forward. I hear a splash and look down to see her in the pool. I frown a moment, confused. Weren’t we just running away from the pool?

I stop wondering when she lifts her bra over her head and tosses it to the side. The rippling water obscures the view when she takes her panties off, but it doesn’t take much for me to imagine what she’s revealing.

“Come catch me, pool boy,” she repeats.

I dive in after her, and this time, she lets me catch her. She laughs when I pull her close and kiss her hungrily on her lips, her neck, her shoulders, her perfect, taut breasts.

“Slow down, Nate. There’s no need to be in such a hurry.”

I try to slow down, but I can’t. I grab her hips and pull her close, desperate to reach the conclusion of my efforts and feel us connect the way Vivian and I connected only minutes ago. She laughs again and wraps her legs around me, helping me.

“Okay, then,” she teases. “If you insist.”

She pulls me in, and I moan as the sensations start. Then I catch something out of the corner of my eye. I look to the left and cry out.

Vivian Chase is watching us, still naked, her arms crossed over her chest and a teasing smile on her face. I start to stammer an apology when Lila laughs and turns my head to the right.

A chill runs through me when I see Julian and Clara Kensington also watching. Julian has his arms crossed, and he's smiling his slightly contemptuous smile. Clara is holding a cocktail glass in one hand and a needle in the other.

"What the hell?" I cry out.

I try to push Lila off of me, but she squeezes her legs around my hips and moves more urgently on top of me. The combination of pleasure and mortification is nauseating.

"Please," I whisper. "Please stop."

"Relax, buddy," a final voice says, and I realize that the security guard is here too.

So are the Chos and the Patels and the Van Huycks. Every person I've met in this neighborhood is gathered around the Kensington's pool watching Lila ride me like it's the last night of her life.

"I told you," Lila says, "Everyone spies on everyone here."

Her face changes from a teasing smile to a primal, almost predatory snarl. She grabs my hips and slams her own hips down onto me hard and fast, her eyes boring into me with something that looks almost like hate.

All thoughts of pleasure are gone. I scream and struggle, trying to pull away from her, trying to get out of here, but I can't move. I can only close my eyes and wait for it to end.

"Oh God! Oh no, no, NO! Annie!"

I open my eyes again, and I'm no longer in the Kensington's pool. I'm no longer naked, either. Lila's not here, and neither is Vivian or any of the others.

I'm on a sidewalk in Encino. My sidewalk. The sidewalk in front of my old house. I'm not nineteen anymore, either. I'm ten years old, and I'm staring at the body of my sixteen-year-old sister. Her pretty brown hair is caked and matted with blood. One side of her face is smashed in, and her left leg is twisted awkwardly, torn and broken from the impact with the sports car that hit her at ninety miles per hour.

"Annie!"

That's my mother screaming. She's younger now, ten years younger, but she looks twenty years younger. She's beautiful. Even more beautiful than Vivian Chase, though I don't think of that beauty the same way.

She won't be beautiful for much longer. Five weeks from now, she'll take her first drink. She won't stop drinking. Two years later, my father will divorce her. I'll cry and beg him to stay, and he'll look at me like I'm dirt stuck to his shoe and won't bother to answer me. Two years after that, Mom and I will be evicted from our house and move to the shitty apartment in Cudahy where we live now.

Six months after that, I'll come home from school to find my mom on a bender. She'll look at me with contempt and hate and say, "I wish it was you."

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I wake up and sit bolt upright, crying out. I sit still a minute, hoping my mother didn't hear.

Of course, she didn't. She's still drunk. She won't hear anything for the next twelve hours.

There's moisture on my face, and I can't tell if it's sweat or tears. Probably both.

I roll out of bed and fall to my knees, clasping my fists and putting my head down on the mattress like I'm praying. I'm not praying. I decided a long time ago that if God was real, He didn't give a shit about people like me.

My heart pounds in my chest, and I breathe huge gulps of air. I feel like I'm drowning. My body shakes, and my mouth feels clammy and dry at the same time.

"God," I whisper hoarsely, still not praying. "Oh God."

It's a long moment before the shaking calms down. I try to remember what I was dreaming about, and to my dismay find the images—all of them—just as clear as they were when they occurred.

I try to forget what I was dreaming, but I can't. The images run around my head in circles, refusing to release me.

But one thing can release me.

I lift my eyes to the closet and feel a rush of mixed fear and desire course through me.

Desire's the wrong word. This is more like desperation.

I tear my head away and sob softly, clamping my hands in front of me and squeezing

hard enough that my palms turn white, and my fingers turn a bright shade of red.

“Please,” I whisper, “God please.”

But God doesn’t answer my prayer. I still see my sister’s body on the pavement in front of me, and when I open my eyes, I continue to see it, lifeless, mangled, just like the family she left behind, just like the life I’m forced to live.

It won’t matter if I get out of this apartment. It won’t matter if I get out of Cudahy. It won’t matter if I end up living in Autumn Downs or Beverly Hills or the Palace of Fucking Versailles. I’ll never escape the memory of Annie’s body lying broken in a pool of her own blood.

But I can numb the pain. I can push it away. I can find relief for a moment.

I make one last effort to stay strong. “God, please.”

God remains silent.

I sigh, and the strength leaves my body. My hands unclench, and I collapse onto the bed for a moment. Then I stand and walk toward the closet and the relief that waits hidden inside.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

One-oh-five. The heatwave continues to worsen.

This should be good news for me. It is good news. I have appointments scheduled through the next six workdays, a total of sixty-six pools. It's a tall order, but I have the hang of things now, and it won't take me so long to clean the pools as it took me to clean Vivian's and the Kensingtons'. I can get a pool done in an hour, I figure. Allowing a few minutes to get from house to house and fifteen to drive the van to and from the company lot to Autumn Downs, and that's twelve to thirteen hours a day. Not bad for a young man looking to earn extra money.

The heat isn't even that terrible. Okay, that's a lie. It fucking sucks, but it's not going to kill me. I can handle sweating for a few months while I save some money.

The problem is twofold: first, I don't start early today. It's now ten o'clock, and I won't get started for at least another twenty minutes because I have to get my vacuum back from the Kensingtons. Second, I'm not in a good spot to be dealing with heat right now.

Both of those problems have the same cause. The security guard—whose name is Danny, I now know—picks up on the most visible symptom of that cause but thankfully doesn't figure out the actual cause.

“You okay, buddy? You're sweating like a pig in there. You don't have AC in that van?”

I do have AC, and right now it's at full blast. I smile at him and hope that my pupils have reduced to a normal size. “I'm good. I'll be okay.”

He doesn't look very sure about that, and to be honest, I'm not so sure myself. "All right, buddy. Let me know if you need anything."

I need you to stop calling me buddy. Can you do that? Think that's possible, sport? Champ? Danny, old pal?

"I will. Thank you."

I drive on and release a breath I don't know I'm holding. The irritability is another symptom of the cause that makes this heatwave unbearable today.

I used last night. Not much, but "not much" is a relative term when it comes to heroin.

God, just thinking that word, I feel an itch in my arm.

I resist the urge to scratch. It'll only peel the scab, and it won't do anything to hide the welt in the crook of my elbow.

I'm lucky. A lot of places are drug testing now. Even fast-food places are starting to require random drug checks. I'm damned lucky Best Pool Cleaners isn't one of those companies yet. Not that I had anything in my system when I interviewed, but if they did a random test right now, I'd probably end up in jail before the end of the day.

Fuck, my mind is all over the place. That's another symptom of coming down.

Heroin's a hell of a drug. When I'm high, I'm high. I mean, I'm on cloud nine. I'm so far above the problems of life that it's like I'm not even human anymore. I'm some angel or demigod happily floating through existence.

When I shot up last night, the relief was immediate. There's nothing like it. It hits

harder and faster than pills and stays longer. My dreams fade almost immediately. I can't even remember the dreams I had about Vivian and Lila. I can still remember the dream of my sister, but it's muddy and it doesn't affect me the way it does when I wake up in the middle of the night. That feeling is gone, and I am free.

But, like every other drug, there's a time to pay the piper, and I'm paying for it now. I feel like I've just run a marathon. At the same time, I feel like I'm ready to run another one. My body is exhausted, but my heart's pounding. I'm shivering, but I'm also melting.

God, today's going to suck. It's supposed to hit one-eighteen today, and I'm going to be working in the sun. I'll probably end up sweating twenty pounds off today and come home a beanpole.

That thought causes me to chuckle. Would Mom even notice if I came home skinny and bug-eyed? Probably not. She never noticed when I used before, and I was using every day for a while.

What if I didn't come home? Hell, it's not out of the question that I'll pass out on the job and fall and hit my head. Would she even realize I was gone?

Yeah, she'd realize it. Rent is due in three weeks. When I didn't show up to give her the four hundred dollars, she'd realize I was gone.

It occurs to me as I pull in front of the Kensingtons' house that I don't promise myself never to use again. That concerns me. After I quit, I promise myself I'll never use again. Obviously, I do, but very rarely, and only after a night like last night. I've used five times in the last three years, and the first four times, I promise myself I'll never use again.

But I didn't make that promise this time. And even now that I'm thinking it, I can't

quite make that promise.

“God, I hate this neighborhood,” I mutter under my breath.

I follow that with a bitter chuckle. Typical junkie response, blame something else for my own choices. I sigh and get out of the van, and it’s not until then I realize that the Kensingtons are about to see a sweaty, shivering mess of a pool boy walk up to them and tell them he forgot the two thousand dollar vacuum he used to clean their pool, and can he please come and get it so he doesn’t get fired?

Why the hell didn’t I just get it last night?

Woulda coulda shoulda.

I knock on the door and brace myself for what will shockingly not be the most awkward conversation I’ve had since taking this job.

No one answers.

My first thought is one of relief, but that’s only because my mind still isn’t working right. I still need to talk to them. Just because they didn’t answer the first time doesn’t mean I can write a note on their door and wait for them to come back.

I knock again. Then a third time. Then I ring the doorbell. Finally, I look for their contact info in the sheet Best Pool gives me and call their number.

No answers. God damn it.

I run my hand through my hair and think about what to do. I need that vacuum. They don’t notice it’s missing yesterday, but I won’t get away with that forever. At some point, someone’s going to inventory the van, and when they realize it’s not there,

we're going to have a conversation.

But what can I do? It's not like I can break into their house.

That gives me an idea. It's not a good idea, but I can't exactly say it's a bad one. At least, it's not worse than any other idea I've had recently.

I can't break into the Kensingtons' house, but I can hop the fence to their pool. They don't have a dog, and I didn't notice any security cameras or alarm systems in the backyard. I can go in, grab the vacuum, push it out the door and take it to the van. I can even lock the gate again after. I'll just go back inside, lock the gate, then hop the fence and get back to the van. Simple.

I check my phone. It's ten-twenty-seven. That's more than enough time to get this done and get to the Murphys' house the next road over. Worst-case scenario, one of the neighbors sees me and calls the Kensingtons. I doubt the Kensington will even bother to call me once they hear I'm just breaking in to steal my own equipment. They surely won't call Best Pool. After all, I've already cleaned their pool, and they can just hire someone else to clean it next time if they're not happy that I left equipment behind and trespassed when they weren't home to retrieve it.

I don't quite convince myself that this is the smart thing to do, but I do convince myself that it's the only thing to do.

"Damn it, Nate. This is why we don't do drugs anymore."

Once more, I note that it's not a promise to stop.

I take a deep breath and release it slowly. Time to get to work.

The sun is far more punishing outside of the van than inside. I can feel my shoulders

start to slump in exhaustion already.

Fuck, today's gonna suck.

As I reach the gate, a stray thought occurs to me. The Kensington aren't home, but Lila might be. She's my age, so she's technically an adult, but her parents might have a rule about not answering the door when they're not home.

Wouldn't that just be the icing on the cake? I hop the fence and see Lila sunbathing by the pool. How do I convince her I'm not a creep then?

An image flashes through my mind of Lila in the pool, arms and legs wrapped around me, eyes flashing wildly in the moonlight.

I shake my head to clear that thought. That is the definition of the last place my mind needs to go right now.

I reach the gate and walk a few feet to the left, where I know there's grass on the other side. It's now or never.

I've made it pretty clear that I don't expect any answers to my prayers, but I still say, "God, please don't let anyone be home.

I jump and catch the edge of the fence, then pull myself up and over. Back when I was using every day, I would go some days without eating, and I wouldn't have been able to vault a fence like that. Yet another reason to throw the shit away.

Yet another failure to promise myself that I will.

I land on the other side and look around for the vacuum. I find it right where I left it on the edge of the pool, but I no longer care about it. I'm far more interested in



what's inside of the pool than what's outside. Or rather, who's inside the pool.

God's in a habit of not answering my prayers lately. Lila Kensington is in the pool.  
She's not naked, which is a good thing.

She's also not alive, which is very, very, very bad.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Detective III Lena Ramirez could have wished for a better start in her new role as Chief Investigator of the Major Crimes Homicide Division. She didn't mind handling murder cases, at least, not any more than any other police officer minded seeing violent crime scenes for a living, but she hated when those crimes took place in the wealthier neighborhoods. She'd had exactly one murder case in a wealthy neighborhood before now, six years ago when she was still Detective I. A real estate mogul screwing his nanny on the side found out said nanny was pregnant and decided he might as well have her killed instead of any number of other ways he could have handled it.

The case was straightforward enough, but the department acted like it was anything but. Everything Lena did was scrutinized, second-guessed, countermanded, picked apart and handed back to her with the vague instruction to "look closer."

She understood why. When you were dealing with wealthy people, you were dealing with expensive lawyers, and that meant lawsuits and appeals and smear campaigns and general warfare between the department and the lovely one-tenth-of-one-percenters of the various ritzy enclaves of the City of Fallen Angels. It was critical that LAPD dot every i, cross every t, and punctuate every sentence or else murderers got to go home to their jacuzzis and toast their escape with bottles of champagne that cost as much as some cars.

She still hated it. Part of her wanted to let Harris handle the investigation, but if she gave into that urge, she'd end up a desk jockey like Punto, and that wasn't a life she wanted.

So, she was here, investigating the murder of nineteen-year-old Lila Kensington,

daughter of former C-list horror actress Clara Kensington nee Summers and tech darling and city council hopeful Julian Kensington.

At least it wasn't a hair short of a hundred twenty degrees outside.

She stepped out of the car and walked toward the house. Harris was already there along with four uniforms, and she allowed herself a moment of irritation that she hadn't just stayed at the office after all.

He looked at her and nodded in that affected devil-may-care attitude that for a brief minute at the start of her detective career had attracted her to him. Now it just annoyed her.

Hell, everything annoyed her right now. Screw this goddamned heat.

It didn't help her mood at all that Harris looked cool as a cucumber. Detective II Damien Harris was one of those rare creatures who could wear a pair of khakis, a white long-sleeve, and a woolen blazer in every kind of weather and never appear uncomfortable.

"Body's still in the pool," Harris said. "Uniforms are taking pictures. I've instructed them not to touch anything."

"But they're stomping all over everything. What about footprints?"

"They're dusting for prints too. Foot, finger and palm. Come on, Lena, give me some credit."

"Who called it in?"

"Christ, good morning to you too."

“Not in the mood, Damien. Who called it in?”

“Pool boy. Said he came over to retrieve a piece of equipment he forgot yesterday. Hopped the fence to the pool and found the body.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “That’s not suspicious at all.”

“That’s what I thought. Although he did admit it right away, so I’m allowing for the slim possibility that he’s just a moron and not a killer. The kid was sweating like a drunk hippopotamus, but that could just be the heat.”

“Where is he right now?”

“He’s around the corner just outside the fence door. Vince and Morales are with him.”

“Got it. You keep handling the scene. Go ahead and call CSI. I’m going to talk to the kid. What’s his name?”

“Nathan Harlow. Goes by Nate. Also nineteen. Just got a job with Best Pool Cleaners handling their clients here in Autumn Downs.”

“And that’s also suspicious. Good-looking kid?”

“Go see for yourself.”

Lena thought of snapping at him to answer her but decided against it. It was only the heat that was making her so bitchy.

She walked around the house and offered a silent prayer of thanks that this had taken place in the flats and not the hills. If she’d had to walk up and down a damned

mountain to talk to this kid, she might have just tossed her badge in her car and walked home instead.

The kid was, as Harris had promised, with Vince and Morales. He sat against the fence, shaking slightly. Lena felt a touch of sympathy. Seeing a dead body wasn't fun, especially if it wasn't something you were used to.

Her sympathy disappeared as soon as it landed. For all she knew, he could be the reason there was a dead body.

"I'll take it from here, boys," she told the uniforms.

"Kid says he got here around ten-thirty," Vince offered. "Says he had to hop the fence to get a pool vacuum."

"Yes, thank you," Lena said patiently. "I'll take it from here."

Vince frowned, clearly unhappy that she didn't shower praise on him for discovering that deep and groundbreaking piece of evidence. He joined Morales, and the two of them walked away.

Lena took a moment to size Nathan Harlow up. He was indeed a good-looking kid, tall, tanned and strong. He had wispy blonde hair and bright blue eyes above a face that should have earned him a job as the next teen heartthrob and not a guy who actually cleaned pools.

At the moment, that face was wide-eyed with shock. Lena decided that his shock was genuine.

Didn't mean he was innocent.

“Nathan, right?”

The kid nodded.

“I’m detective Lena Ramirez. Mind if I talk to you a little bit?”

He nodded again. She flashed her best smile and said, “You’re going to have to use words if you talk to me, though. I don’t do well at guessing faces.”

That was a lie, of course. Guessing faces was her job.

“Yes, you can talk to me.”

Cute voice too.

“So Nathan, tell me what happened.”

“I already told the other two what happened.”

“So tell me.”

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. He was indeed sweating profusely, and Lena doubted it was all to do with the heat.

“I showed up to the house and knocked on the door, but no one was home.”

“Why were you here?”

“I needed to get the vacuum.”

“The one you forgot yesterday, right?”

“Yeah. I needed to get it back, so I knocked on the door. When no one answered, I decided to just go into...” he stopped and looked shrewdly up at Lena.

“I’m not going to arrest you for hopping the fence for a vacuum cleaner,” Lena said. “Bigger fish to fry. On the other hand, you start keeping things from me, I start wondering if there’s something I should arrest you for. Get what I’m saying?”

Nate nodded. “Yeah. So I decided to hop the fence. I really need that vacuum. Best Pool Cleaners will fire me if I lose their equipment, and I really need this job.”

“Not to be a bitch,” she interrupted, “but I don’t care about your job right now. Tell me what you saw when you hopped the fence.”

He swallowed. “I saw that.” He hooked his head toward the open gate of the yard where uniforms were still milling around, hopefully not obliterating her crime scene.

“You have to tell me what that is,” Lena said firmly but gently. “I need to know exactly what you saw.”

He sighed. “She was in the pool in her underwear and her t-shirt. She was floating face down, and I could tell that she was... that she’d been in there like that for a while.”

“Anything seem out of place?”

“You mean other than the fucking body in the pool?”

She squatted down so she was at eye level with him. He didn’t like that and turned his head away to avoid eye contact. She noted that and said, “Hey, Nate? I get that this is a tough thing to talk about. I also get that I’m not the cuddliest person alive, but I need you to put on some big boy pants and talk to me, okay? We need to figure out

what happened here, and you need us to figure out what happened here, because at the moment, I have a dead girl your age wearing next to nothing and no one in the house but you.”

“I wasn’t here when she died!” he exploded.

“Okay,” she said calmly, lifting her hands placatingly. “I’m just telling you what I walked up on. I’m talking to you because I want to know what I didn’t see. So, was there anything out of place?”

Nate shook his head. “No. Not that I could tell. Everything was where I left it yesterday. Even the vacuum.” His brow furrowed. “That’s odd.”

“What’s odd?”

“Well...” he hesitated a moment but this time Lena didn’t have to subtly threaten him to get him to talk again. “Clara told me that they were going to have friends over last night. She wanted the pool cleaned so they could all use it. But there’s no sign that they used it. I mean, I would say that they cleaned it after the party or had a servant clean it or something, but the vacuum was right where I left it too.”

“You think she lied to you about her plans?”

He hesitated, but his eyes told Lena that’s exactly what he thought. Or at least, what he wanted her to think he thought. “I mean, I told her that she had to wait twenty-four hours before using the pool, so maybe they moved the party.”

“Hmm. Maybe. How well did you know Lila?”

“I didn’t know her at all. I just cleaned their pool yesterday.”



“Did you talk to her?”

“Yeah, for like, thirty seconds.”

“What did you guys talk about?”

Nate’s eyes narrowed before he spoke, but Lena didn’t call him out on it this time. The kid obviously wasn’t telling her everything, but he was too on edge to push right now.

“Nothing. She just said hi. I was about to leave, so we didn’t talk much. That’s all.”

“Did you like her?”

“I didn’t fucking know her!”

”Okay,” Lena said calmly. ”I just mean, did you think she was cute?”

“Cute?”

“Pretty. Hot. Sexy. Attractive.”

He flared up. “You think I had something to do with this?”

“I think you’re not answering my—”

“Yes. Okay? She was hot. But I didn’t think of her like that.” Lena lifted an eyebrow, and he explained, “I mean, I didn’t... I...” he sighed. “Look, these are rich people. I’m not rich. It doesn’t matter if she dropped to her knees and begged me to screw her, I’m not looking for that kind of trouble.”

“Did she beg you to screw her?”

“No! For God’s sake, she just said hi! I said hi, then I said bye. That’s it.”

Lena held his gaze just long enough to make him feel uncomfortable, then nodded.  
“Okay.”

She stood and said, “My partner got your number. Keep your phone on. I might have some more questions later. Do yourself a favor, kid. Don’t leave your shit behind from now on.”

“Oh, trust me. I won’t.”

He got up and half-jogged away. Lena allowed him to walk about ten yards, then called, “Your vacuum.”

He swore and rushed back for the vacuum, then stomped away again. Lena watched as he loaded it into the back of a Ford Transit van, then got in the driver’s seat and sped off.

Harris walked up to her and asked, “How’d it go?”

“Not a bad first talk. I’ll fill you in on the details. Have the parents been called yet?”

“Not yet. CSI wants to take a look first.”

“Call them. I want to see how they act around CSI.”

“You got it, boss.”

Lena looked back toward the street. The van was gone now. She thought back to her

talk with Nate and wondered just what it was he wasn't saying. She decided she would have to pay him a visit later and figure out exactly what he was trying to hide.

I look forward to getting to know you better, Mr. Harlow.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

I don't know how I manage to get my work done today. At any moment, I expect to collapse to the ground and start shaking again. I expect to start screaming and crying, or maybe shouting. When I finish one house and move on to the next, I expect to instead drive out of Autumn Downs, all the way to South Central or maybe Huntington Park, somewhere I can find a fix and drown out the image of Lila Kensington face down in her pool. I'm pretty sure the only reason I don't go home is that going there means I really will get a fix, and then I can kiss this job goodbye.

Part of me thinks that might not be a bad thing. How much more of this can I really take? For God's sake, it's my third day, and I've already witnessed a murder.

And there's no doubt in my mind it's a murder. Lila Kensington might not have been at the top of her emotional game, but she definitely wasn't suicidal. Suicidal people don't give a shit if the damned pool boy is staring at them, and they definitely don't go outside to flirt with that pool boy.

Someone drowned her. Or they killed her and then made it look like she drowned. And I got to be the lucky asshole who saw her.

Clara's face flits across my mind. The fake smile she wore over a mask of rage, despair and hate. I know the feelings all too well. Rage at being trapped in a life you can't stand, despair that you'll ever find your way out and hate for the person responsible for keeping you there. I thought that Julian was the person Clara hated, but now I'm wondering if maybe Lila was the person they both hated. Maybe Lila wasn't doing well in school, and they thought she would be living at home for the next ten years eating into their chance at a life to themselves. Maybe she did drugs or had an eating disorder, and...

Yeah, that might be it. She didn't look too thin when I saw her yesterday, but after talking to Vivian, I was in a pretty sex-crazed mood, so I'm pretty sure seeing any girl half-naked would have set me off. And her arm did look really thin when I shook her hand.

"All right, wonderful! Thank you so much, Nate."

I smile at the plump, overly dressed woman in front of me and remember her name at the last possible instant. "Of course, Mrs. Lalonde. I look forward to being of service to you in the future."

Mrs. Lalonde beamed and said, "Aren't you a darling. Have a wonderful day, dear."

"You as well."

This time when I leave, I remember to take the vacuum with me.

That reminds me of making an idiot of myself in front of the cop.

That reminds me that things are even worse than I've been thinking. I'm not just a witness to a murder, I'm a damned suspect. Like the cop said, she walked up on a dead girl and a pool boy the same age as the victim who admitted to hopping the fence into the backyard without telling the homeowners. If I was in her shoes, I would jump right to the conclusion that Mr. Pool Boy was a liar and a murderer.

I get to carry that pleasant thought with me as I start work on my next house. This one is inhabited by the Inohamas. Mrs. Inohama doesn't even speak to me. She has her housekeeper show me the way to the pool but makes sure I see the disgust in her eyes when she looks me up and down.

That's fine with me. The less I know about everyone here, the better. If you want to

drown someone in your pool, go ahead, but leave me the fuck out of it.

Lila's smile flashes across my mind, not the crazed image from my fever dream the night before, but the real one: the amused, playful smirk she wears when she teases me for catching her in her underwear.

No, she definitely wasn't suicidal. She was sad, but she wasn't the kind of sad that overdoses and belly flops into the family pond. She was just a little lonely, and she came outside to see if the only person her age probably for miles wanted to help her ease some of that loneliness.

And I was too worried about my job to even give her the time of day.

Guilt stabs me through the chest at that thought. I had a chance to be the last person to show Lila some kindness, and instead I blew her off.

My thoughts drift back to the murder. I can't help but wonder if Clara and Julian really killed her. It seems utterly insane that they would kill their own daughter, but it's not like they'd be the first parents to do that.

And Clara did lie about that party. I left the question open for the cop because I didn't want to get dragged into the middle of that conversation, but I know for a fact she wasn't telling me the truth. Even if they had a team of cleaners ready to make the place spotless the moment the party ended, there's no way that everything would look exactly the same as it did when I left. No fucking way.

And thinking back to Clara's attitude when she was telling me about the party, I don't think it was ever going to happen to begin with. She had looked at her husband while she mentioned it. She was saying that for his benefit. See honey? Look how much shit I have to put up with. See how nothing goes right in my life. This is your fault. You're supposed to make everything perfect for me.

And Julian... I put his disinterest off to a practiced superiority, but now I wonder if he also is just tired of his life. He's certainly tired of his wife. There was no attraction at all when he looked at her, and not even a hint of tenderness. He despises her.

Maybe he despised Lila too. Maybe he saw an opportunity and took it.

And I just gave him the best possible scapegoat. His lawyers probably make enough money to live here. They're going to be all over the suspicious pool boy who returned to their home a day after spying on their daughter through a window and viciously murdered the poor girl for turning down her advances. Meanwhile, my bored public defender is going to tell me that I should plea no contest to murder in the second and get parole after twenty-five instead of life without.

God, this is bad.

"Thank you," Mrs. Inohama's housekeeper says. She makes sure to lift her eyes a little higher than mine so she can look down on me—after all, she's a more important servant than I am—and finishes with, "that will be all."

"Of course," I say. "I hope to be of service to the Inohamas soon."

I leave the house and check my list. Four houses down, two to go. Then I get to go home and try to convince myself not to use.

"Nathan? Nate?"

The voice startles me badly enough that I jump completely off the ground. I spin around and see Vivian Chase recoiling slightly. "Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

Lovely.

I feel heat climb up my cheeks and say, “No, it’s okay. I’m just... it’s been kind of a rough day. Um... what are you doing here? I mean...” I mean exactly what I said, so I just let my voice trail off instead of trying to think of something more polite.

“I was looking for you. I heard about what happened. Are you okay?”

There’s no sultriness in her expression. The seductive, early-middle-aged goddess act she wore the other day is gone. There’s only genuine concern. I’m so desperate for actual human contact that I almost melt down in front of her, but I pick up on something that gives me serious pause.

“How did you hear about it? It happened four hours ago.”

She gives me a smile, and some bitterness leaks into her compassion, though that bitterness isn’t directed at me. “That’s an eternity in a neighborhood like this. To directly answer your question, though, the cops came by and asked about it. Then they asked if I knew you.” her smile turned just a touch flirtatious, and she added, “They were very interested to know why I invited you into my house. It took a while to convince them that all we did was share a glass of lemonade.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet.” I manage a smile of my own, but only for a second.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

I open my mouth to say no, but the flirtation and bitterness is gone, and I want nothing more than to say yes.

But I still say, “No. I mean, thank you. I really appreciate it, but I still have two more pools to clean.”

“How about after? Dinner, at my place?”



I really should say no. I might only be nineteen years old, but I'm not stupid. The sultry look has come back into her eyes now. She's trying to hide it, but she's not doing a very good job. If I go to her place for dinner, I'll be staying for dessert, and I don't mean cake and ice cream.

"Yeah," I reply. "That sounds good."

She smiles again, and I feel another rush of heat. "Okay. I'll see you later, Nate. Don't worry about going home after work. You can shower at my place."

I try not to think about what else I'll be doing at her place. I don't succeed.

But for a moment, at least, I have an image of a living woman in my mind and not the images of two dead girls.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

“Nate? Nate is that you?”

My first instinct hearing that voice is to once more fantasize about leaving this damned neighborhood and driving the van back to the lot at Best Pool Cleaners with a thank you very much but also fuck you very much. It’s like every single worst thing that could possibly happen to me has to happen in the last twenty-four hours.

“Holy shit, it is you! Damn, son, when did you start lifting? You look like Thor!”

I turn to Marco Delgado and smile. “When did you start eating donuts all day? You look like Sumo Sam.”

Marco laughs and throws his arms around me, wrapping me in a tight bear hug. “Damn, bro, where you been? I haven’t seen you in years!”

He pulls away, and I get my first good look at him. He doesn’t look at all like Sumo Sam. He’s five-foot-eight and maybe a hundred fifty pounds of wiry muscle with not an ounce of fat on him. In fact, other than a rough stubble on his chin, he looks exactly like the kid I used to get high and boost cars with.

“Trying to live clean, man,” I say, “you know how it is.”

“For real, bro, straight up.”

That’s how most conversations with Marco go. He strings together a bunch of slang that sort of makes a conversation, and I reply pretty much the same way.

“So you’re a pool boy now? That must be why none of the bitches here look at me anymore. They’ve got a new boy toy to play with.”

That’s another thing about Marco. He has a... shall we say, juvenile attitude toward women.

“Are you kidding man? No one’s looking at commoners like us.”

I think of Vivian’s dinner invitation and hope Marco can’t tell that I’m lying.

“Seriously, bro,” he replies. “I’ll be honest, I took this job thinking I could comfort some lonely housewives, you know what I’m saying? But they won’t even let me in the house.”

“What job is that?” I ask.

“Gardener, bro!” he opens his arms and looks down at himself. “You can’t tell?”

It’s true that his olive-green polo shirt and khaki shorts are stained with dirt and grass.

“I guess I missed it. I was too busy looking at the caterpillar that died on your chin.”

Marco frowns hurtfully. “Hey man, ladies love this beard. This is how I get chicks.”

“I thought you said the women here didn’t like you.”

”Well, yeah, here. There’s women everywhere, bro.”

“Good point.”

“So you want to share a sandwich with me or what? I finished working already, and I don’t have to give the truck back until six.”

I hesitate, but my last appointment isn't for another forty-five minutes, and while part of me says I should make an excuse and keep Marco in the past with all of my other mistakes, I don't feel like sitting alone in the van, and despite my earlier spiel about Marco being yet another terrible thing to happen to me today, his cheerfulness is infectious, and I'll take all the cheer I can get right now.

"Sure. Just as long as it doesn't have chilis in it."

He rolls his eyes and shoves me playfully. "Come on, don't be a little bitch. Why are white people so afraid of spicy food anyway?"

"That's offensive," I say with a grin.

"So report me for a hate crime. I saw some cops here earlier. Maybe they'll arrest me."

"Did you hear what happened?"

He shrugs. "Probably some rich kid OD'd or something."

I stagger when he says that, and he says, "Christ, did you trip on your own feet?"

I force a smile and say, "It's just that you're too beautiful. I can't take my eyes off of you."

"Just as long as you keep your hands to yourself."

We reach his truck and sit on the tailgate. He hands me a half sandwich. It's a Philly cheesesteak with a very generous helping of hot peppers.

"You can just pick them out if you want, sweetheart," he says gently.

“Bite me.”

He laughs and says, “So, you like the truck?”

“It’s nice. Is it yours? I thought you said you had to bring it back.”

He scoffs. “Is it mine? Come on, dude, you know I don’t live like that. Even when we were boosting, I had to give the rides to someone else. No, it’s the company’s. But I get to drive it forty hours a week.” He pats the bed and adds, “It’s got wireless phone connection, navigation, satellite radio, heated seats... it’s like a freaking Mercedes with a bed. Only the best for rich people. They can’t even see other people drive shitty cars, so the landscaper makes sure that we get the top of the line.”

I shrug. “Beats boosting, am I right?”

Marco looks me up and down, and I feel a chill. I’m not afraid of him, but I’m afraid of the life I left behind. Everything that’s happened—the drugs, the cops, Marco showing up—is beginning to feel a lot like that life coming back to me.

“What happened to you anyway, dog? After you got caught.”

“What do you think?”

“I mean, you didn’t go to jail, or there’s no way you’d be working for a company here in the rich part of L.A.”

I sighed. “No, I didn’t go to jail. The judge gave me probation and community service and told me that if I ever stepped outside of the law again, he’d make sure that I got every possible punishment the law could throw at me.”

Marco shook his head. “Pinche pendejos. I’m telling you, man, it’s all about stepping

on us. It's not about race or religion or whether you're gay or straight. They just want people to believe that, so we don't pay attention to the real problem. The rich people are stepping on the poor people. They always have. That's why there's so much shit in the world."

"I mean, he gave me a break, so..."

"He didn't give you a break, ese, he gave you a warning. He said, 'Do what I say, or you're going to prison for life.'"

"Well, I wouldn't go to prison for life for boosting a car. That's like ten years max."

"Nah, bro." He shook his head again and said forcefully. "It's for life. Once they have you in their system, you're always in their system."

His smile is gone, replaced by the hard look that characterizes the other half of his personality. This conversation isn't new either. During the rare occasions when I would question whether or not we should be stealing cars, this was the look he'd adopt. He'd get on the tangent of poverty and wealth and end up spouting the same rant he's spouting now.

I'm not interested in hearing that rant again, so I try to turn the conversation by saying, "Well, hey, we get to drive cool cars without the cops trying to drag us to jail, so that's good."

It's a weak attempt at changing the subject, but it seems to work. Marco nods and stays silent a moment, then smiles and says, "So you been doing anything on the side?"

Okay, it doesn't work quite so well. "No, man. Like I said, trying to live clean."

“That why you haven’t talked to me in three years?”

My smile fades. I start to stammer an excuse, but he laughs and claps me on the shoulder. “I’m just teasing you, bro. I get it. The cops were watching you, and you couldn’t risk them getting to me. I appreciate it, man. Omerta, right?”

“Yeah. Right.”

“But hey, we’re out now. You’re the world’s hottest pool boy, and I’m the sexy, exotic ethnic gardener.”

“Man, don’t talk about yourself like that.”

“What? I’m proud of my ethnicity, bro, I don’t need to hide from it.”

“I know, but...”

“But what? Relax, dog. I’m living the dream.”

“Even though the women don’t like you?”

He grinned at me. “Like I said. There’s women everywhere, bro. I don’t just work here. I work weekends at UCLA. Man, there are some babes there. Sometimes I end up with three women in one night.”

I roll my eyes. “Sure you do.”

“On God, brother. You don’t even have to try there. You would definitely not have to try. You’d have girls all around you on their knees begging for it.”

Did she beg you to screw her?

I stand and say, “Hey man, I’ve got to get back to work. I have one more house to do, and my supervisor gets pissy if I bring the van back late.”

Marco doesn’t seem perturbed at all by my sudden desire to leave. “Sure bro, no worries. Gotta keep the man happy. Hey, you still have the same number?”

“Yeah. Same number.”

He nods. “I’ll hit you up. Good to see you, bro.”

“Yeah. You do that.”

It takes every ounce of my strength to appear nonchalant as I walk back to my van. I can feel Marco’s eyes boring into my back. When I reach the van, I turn around and my blood freezes. He smiles and waves at me, then gets off the tailgate and into the driver’s seat.

In the half-second before that smile, I see a hard look on his face, harder than any I’ve ever seen him wear. It reminds me more of Arturo, the guy we used to boost cars for. Arturo was a genuinely hard man. He had five teardrop tattoos, and from what I’ve heard—and what I absolutely believe—he earned every one of them.

The cops don’t ask me about him. I wouldn’t tell if they had. I’d rather do ten years in prison than be the guy who ratted on Arturo.

Marco never struck me as hard the same way Arturo was, but then again, I haven’t seen Marco in three years. For all the shit I’ve had to deal with, I’ve tried to go a different way. I don’t think Marco has.

I put the van in gear and drive to my last appointment for the day. I can still feel Marco’s hard gaze boring into my back.



## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

I tell myself over and over that this is a bad idea. I decide over and over to just turn around and head home. I can text Vivian an apology and say that I'll make it up to her another night. Then I can just arrange to always be busy until she gets the hint and stops pursuing me.

But all that waits for me at home is a drunk mother, a slate of fresh nightmares and the temptation of a chemical escape from those nightmares. So when I finish work, I drive straight to Vivian's house.

I'll have to go home eventually. Despite my melodrama earlier, Mom isn't so far gone that she won't notice if I don't come home tonight.

But maybe I can return home with a better comfort than the needle.

I knock on the door and try to think about what to say. For some reason, I feel like I should have some sort of greeting prepared, some sort of witty banter that will impress Vivian.

I'm not usually nervous around girls. Marco's teasing earlier about me looking like Thor and girls lining up to get with me, but it's true that I've never had trouble with them.

The thing is, Vivian isn't a girl. She's a woman. She's been with men. What can I possibly—

She opens the door and that thought—and all others—vanish.

She wears a shimmering black evening gown with a deep V-neck and a slit on the left side that goes all the way up to her hip. She wears it above black heels and below a generous amount of red lipstick that somehow manages to make her look ten years younger without taking anything away from the bearing and poise of an experienced older woman. Strictly speaking, she's covering more of her body than she does yesterday in her swimsuit, but the way she wears it makes it look even sexier than the two-piece.

I am keenly aware of the fact that I'm in a sweat-stained work uniform and that I've been working in the hot sun all day. I wonder if she really meant for me not to worry about changing or if I should have at least rinsed off and put on clean clothes before coming here.

She smiles at me, and I instantly want her. Hell, I instantly need her. Maybe when I've lived a little more life, I'll understand what it is about a woman's smile that makes a man so immediately desperate for her. Right now, all I know is that I can't wait to get through dinner, a shower, whatever I need to do to get to the part of the evening where I can take this dress off of her.

"Nate. I'm so glad you're here. Would you like to come inside?"

She shifts her hips slightly as she says this, revealing nearly all of her long, perfectly toned left leg. I swallow and say, a little hoarsely, "I would love to."

Her smile widens, and she steps aside, gesturing for me to pass. When I do, I catch a whiff of rose and lavender, and my knees grow weak.

She closes the door behind us and walks past me, affording me a perfect view of the most perfect rear end I've ever seen. "I made lobster. I hope you're not allergic to shellfish. I forgot to ask."

“No, uh... no, not allergic.”

“Wonderful. I have a delicious Chardonnay I’ve paired with it. I have no idea if Chardonnay is supposed to go with lobster, but I like it, so that’s what we’re drinking.”

“Oh, um...” I feel a flush climb my cheeks again.

She smiles at me and says, “Tonight, Nate, you are old enough to do whatever you want.”

The promise in that sentence is clear. I swallow and say, “Um, thank you. Just one glass, though. I do have to get home eventually. My mom will be waiting for me.”

“How soon do you have to be home?”

I think about that for a moment. Mom will wonder if I don’t come home tonight, but she won’t start wondering until the morning. For her, the morning never begins before nine a.m.

“Um... actually, I can leave whenever. I mean, I can stay whenever. I mean...” God, I am absolutely blowing this.

She laughs, and even though she’s laughing at me, there’s no taunt. I end up chuckling too, and she says, “Then you have time to drink as much as you want.”

She leads me to the kitchen, and I see she’s already set the table, wine included. I’m not really much of a wine guy, but at this point, I’d happily drink transmission fluid if Vivian poured it for me.

I start to sit, then something clicks in my head. I rush to the head of the table and pull

out Vivian's chair. She laughs again and says, "Thank you."

"You're welcome," I reply like a five-year-old, because I've apparently forgotten how to talk to humans.

I take a bite of the lobster to hide my embarrassment. I'm not really a seafood guy either, but the lobster is absolutely delicious. Or maybe it's just that I know what dessert is going to be.

"How do you like it?"

"It's delicious," I say. I remember to swallow my food before I talk, at least.

"Good," she says, "I'm glad." Her smile softens a little. "I want you to have a good night."

I seriously don't understand how I could possibly have a bad night, but I say, "Thank you. That means a lot."

Her smile widens again, but it's the compassionate one from earlier today, not the come-hither smirk of a moment ago. "I'm truly sorry you had to see what happened earlier." The angels singing in my mind quiet, and it must show on my face, because she follows that up with, "I know you probably don't want to talk about it, but I think you should. I think we should."

I'm not sure why it's so important for her to talk about it, but I say, "No, it's okay. Yeah, I, uh... I'm sorry, too. She seemed like a sweet girl."

"She was," Vivian replies. "She was a very sweet girl, and she didn't deserve what happened to her."

I detect something in Vivian's tone, a slight anger that makes me wonder if she suspects more than she's letting on. I decide to probe a little. "So you don't think it was an accident or suicide or something?"

She chuckles with more than a touch of bitterness. "No, it was definitely not suicide. I don't know if it was murder, but it definitely wasn't suicide."

"Are you saying it was maybe an accident?"

She meets my eyes, and now her smile is hard. Not like Marco's face is hard, but not entirely different. "Nate, you're adorable, but you're a lot less adorable when you pretend to be stupid."

"Right. So... are you saying that even if she killed herself, someone else is responsible?"

She looks at me for a moment without saying anything. This time, she reminds me of the detective, Ramirez, like she's trying to figure out if I'm hiding something. Finally, she says, "Remember when I told you that the deception here is refreshingly honest?"

"Yes."

"Well, that wasn't entirely true. What I meant when I said that was that everyone here wears a mask, but because everyone wears a mask, everyone knows that everyone else is wearing a mask. Do you know what I mean?"

Everyone spies on everyone here. "Yeah. I think I do."

She took a bite of her lobster. I tried not to focus on her lips parting and her tongue wrapping around the bite, but I failed badly at that.

When she swallowed, she said, “That means that when other people talk to you, you can be reasonably sure that they’re being dishonest towards you. You know that the way they act toward you isn’t real, and with enough time, you can start to figure out what their intentions toward you are. Generally speaking, at least. For example, Mrs. Cho hates Mrs. Fletcher. She knows that Mr. Fletcher is attracted to her. So, whenever they see each other socially, Mrs. Cho will wear a conservative outfit if it’s only Mrs. Fletcher attending the party or gala or get-together, or what have you. If Mr. Fletcher is there by himself, she’ll also dress conservatively. It’s only when both of the Fletchers are there that Mrs. Cho will spend hours making herself look as beautiful as possible and dress in an evening gown even more seductive than this one.”

“So she doesn’t actually want to seduce Mr. Fletcher, she just wants Mrs. Fletcher to think she is.”

“Close. What she wants is for Mrs. Fletcher to know that her husband wishes she was more attractive.”

I blink, a little—no, a lot taken aback. “What?”

“She doesn’t want Mrs. Fletcher to think her husband will cheat. Men cheat on beautiful women all the time. Just ask my ex. Besides, Mr. Fletcher would never cheat on Mrs. Fletcher. He’s far from a good person—no one here really is—but he’s not a cheater. Mrs. Cho knows that, which is why she knows that the best way to hurt the woman she hates is to lay bare the fact that Mr. Fletcher wishes that his wife was as attractive as the other women he knows. So, when the couple is together, she dresses to kill and drinks in the looks on Janice’s face every time she catches George staring at Yun Hee with that mixture of longing and despair that men wear when they look at something they want but know they can’t have. She wants Janice to know that when her husband is with her, he wishes she were someone more beautiful.”

“Jesus.”

Vivian smiles again, and there’s sadness mixed with the bitterness this time. “That’s the lifestyle of the rich and famous. Stabbing each other in the back for the pettiest of reasons.”

“Why does she hate her so much?”

Vivian shrugs. “I don’t think she even remembers. Could be a slight, she thought Janice cast her way. It could be that she caught her own husband looking at Janice once. Could be that she’s just a bitter person who thinks Janice is happy and envies that fact. That’s not the point anymore, if it ever was. She just hates her, and this is how she hurts her.”

She sips her wine, and this time, it’s the line from her throat to her sternum and the perfect twin orbs nestled on either side that captures my attention. I’m seriously beginning to wonder if I’ll even make it through dinner without throwing myself at her.

“My point,” Vivian says, as she sets her glass down. “Is that with enough time, you can tell who people truly are with each other. What you can never tell is who people truly are behind the closed doors of their own home. The man who looks like he’s got it made and struts around like he’s on cloud nine could be the man who shoots heroin at night just so he can get to sleep without nightmares. Nate? Are you okay?”

I cover my hand with a napkin and get my choking under control. “Yeah,” I reply hoarsely. “Just swallowed the wine the wrong way.”

She chuckles. “Don’t be so eager. Good things come to those who wait.” She sips her own wine—a lot more gracefully than I do, but then she hasn’t just heard someone unwittingly expose their greatest shame—and says, “but sometimes, what’s hidden

underneath the surface comes out in the open, and when it does, it's always explosive and always devastating."

"And you think the stuff with the Kensington is coming out in the open?"

"I think... that we have talked enough about this." The compassionate side comes back out. "Are you okay, Nate? Really."

"Um..." the image of death flashes through my mind again, first Lila, then my sister. "No. No, I'm not."

Vivian doesn't say anything. She just reaches across the table and squeezes my hand. Warmth floods me from head to toe. I'd be lying if I said that a part of that warmth wasn't entirely focused on Vivian's body, but a big part of it has nothing to do with sex.

I can't remember the last time anyone's ever comforted me. My mother's never comforted me. Not when my sister died and definitely not after. Just knowing that someone cares how I feel means more than just about anything else right now.

We don't talk about anything important after that. She asks me about my home life, and I tell her as little as possible about that while not sounding like I'm hiding things. I ask her about her life, and I'm pretty sure she does the same.

When dinner is over, she smiles at me and says, "I promised you a shower."

My heart begins to pound again. "Yes," I say, "but I'll understand if—"

"Don't you dare finish that sentence," she says, still smiling. "Follow me."

If following her into the kitchen is beautiful torture, following her up the stairs is a



thousand times worse. Or better. Both, really.

Her bathroom looks like the spa suite at a five-star hotel. She shows me where the towels are and how to work the settings in the shower. “You’ll have to deal with smelling like me. I only have rose and lavender scented body wash.”

“I would love to smell like you,” I say because I’m an idiot.

She laughs and says, “Well, that’s good. I’ll be waiting for you when you’re done.”

She smiles at me when she says that, and the promise in that smile nearly brings me to my knees. Marco would appreciate the role reversal here.

And that is the last I will be thinking of Marco tonight.

I wait until Vivian leaves the room, then strip and get into the shower. It’s a testament to how gross I feel that for a moment as I’m lathering my body, I forget about the fact that I’m about to have sex with the most attractive woman I’ve ever seen in my life.

I don’t forget for long. Just as I finish rinsing myself, I feel two hands snake around me from behind. My senses instantly come alive, and with my senses, a certain part of my body that feels it’s been waiting just about long enough for something good to come.

A soft yet taut body presses gently to my back, and I gasp, my heart pounding. One hand moves up to my chest. The other moves down and grips me gently, causing another gasp to escape my lips.

Warm breath cascades down my neck, and a soft voice whispers in my ear. “I couldn’t wait.”

I turn to her, and when our bodies meet, the rest of the world vanishes.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Lena had interviewed seventy-three grieving couples in her ten years as a detective. She knew what real heartbreak looked like.

It didn't look like Julian and Clara Kensington.

Clara was an actress, and she was playing for the Academy. Each hitching breath, each shaky-handed dab with her handkerchief, each time she grabbed her husband's hand and released it was timed perfectly to give the impression of someone who was barely able to hold herself together.

Timed too perfectly. Truly grieving parents tended toward one of a few extremes. Either they were in shock and appeared dazed and not entirely present, or they were complete blubbering train wrecks who could barely breathe for weeping so hard, or they were semi- or sometimes fully hysterical lunatics who alternated between crying, laughing and screaming.

Not all parents were like this. Some managed to hold themselves together enough to function and then had their meltdowns in private. No parent managed to act completely devastated yet still function enough to provide an ironclad alibi.

"I just... wish we... were home," Clara stammered. Two words, one and a half second pause, Lena noted. Three second pause at the end of the sentence, then a new sentence. "I... told Barry... that we... should go... check on... Lila, but... he said... she would... be fine." Brief, eight second crying fit. "Oh, why didn't we leave that stupid party at the Feingold's house!"

Lena turned to Julian. Oddly, despite having no thespian training at all, Julian was

doing a far better job of selling grief than Clara was. He was pretending to be in shock and doing a decent job. His eyes were vacant, and he stared through the detectives rather than at them.

But his body was relaxed. Not slumped with the exhaustion of grief or tense with the anxiety of shock, just relaxed. His face seemed dejected, but his body language seemed confident.

Lena didn't like that. She didn't like that one bit.

"Let's go back to the beginning, Mr. Kensington. I want to hear in your own words what happened today."

"Sure," Julian replied. "I... um... we had a party at the beach in Malibu, like Clara said. The Feingolds are morning people, and they were taking advantage of the warm weather, so that's why the party was starting so early. We invited Lila, but she didn't want to go, and that was fine with us. She's nineteen, she's an adult, so we let her stay home. We left around nine-thirty—"

"Not eight-thirty?" Clara asked, eyes widening in surprise.

"No, it was nine-thirty. Remember, because you decided to change into a different outfit and needed it ironed."

"Oh yes, that's right."

Ooh, they were good. They had planned a discrepancy in their stories to make it seem more like a natural memory and less like something they discussed beforehand. Clever, clever little crocodiles.

"So we left at nine-thirty and drove to Malibu. Traffic was... well, traffic, so we got

there around ten-fifteen. We stayed there for the day and came back around an hour ago. And..." he lifted his hands and let them drop. "And this."

"Oh, Lila!"

Clara buried her face in her hands and sobbed, shoulders shaking. Julian put his hand on her wife's shoulder and left it there, still staring through Lena and Harris.

The two detectives looked at each other, and Harris stood. "If you don't mind," Harris told the Kensington. "I'm going to give the Feingolds a call. Just to make sure you were where you say you were."

"Of course," Julian said. Clara kept sobbing.

Lena debated whether to ask the next question. Part of her wanted to make the Kensington sweat a little more before she brought the pool boy into this, but if this was a story, it had been planned well. She wasn't going to make them sweat this way.

"Did you two hire a pool cleaner recently?"

Clara frowned. "Um... we... well, yes." Two second pause, then eyes widen. "You don't think..." One second pause. "Did he do this?"

"We don't think so," Lena said.

It wasn't exactly the truth, but it wasn't exactly a lie either. She just wanted to see how they'd react.

Nothing on their faces indicated they were disappointed that Nathan Harlow wasn't a suspect. That didn't completely rule out the possibility that they had framed him, but it didn't support it, and that was a stretch, anyway. They couldn't have orchestrated

the kid forgetting his pool vacuum.

“Oh God. I hope not. He seemed like such a nice boy. Then again, Lila was always parading herself in front of the boys.”

“Clara,” Julian warned.

“No, I want to hear about that,” Lena said. “What do you mean parading herself in front of the boys?”

“Well, she was a very attractive girl,” Clara said. “And she knew it. And she loved the way the boys looked at her. She was always wearing clothing to attract their attention, and when boys would be over to the house, she would ‘accidentally’ get caught naked.”

“Clara!” Julian barked. “For God’s sake! You’re talking about this now?”

“I’m just saying! If that boy hurt her, then we need to know!”

“How could he have hurt her? He wasn’t even here!”

Lena’s training kept her from reacting to that. Neither parent looked at her, waiting for her to contradict them.

They would have to be told eventually. That wasn’t information Lena could expect to keep for long. But she decided to keep it now. All three of them—Kensingtons and Pool Boy—were hiding something. She wanted more time to find out what before she started putting on the heat.

Harris returned to the room. “Alibi checks out,” he said. “Barry Feingold is sending pictures that can prove they were there.”

Lena nodded. She stood and said, “Thank you for your time. We may call with further questions, but for now, I encourage you to focus on final arrangements for Lila and let us do our job.”

Clara sniffled. “Thank you, Detective.”

Julian nodded and offered a perfect facsimile of a half-smile. “Thank you.”

As soon as Lena and Harris were in Lena’s car, Harris asked. “Do you believe them?”

“Not for a second. But... I don’t know if that means they’re the killers, or if they just don’t want Julian’s political career ruined by scandal.”

“I mean, it’s going to look bad no matter what.”

“Yes,” Lena agreed. “But some things look worse.”

“Like what?”

“Hell if I know. But we’re going to find out.”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

I can't remember the last time I smiled. Like, really smiled. Obviously, I can move the corners of my mouth up, but I can't remember the last time an actually joyful smile came to my face for no reason.

Well, not no reason. Obviously, there's a reason.

I leave that reason's house at one in the morning. She and I spend the entire time, from when she walks into the shower to right before I leave naked.

I'm not an idiot. I know I'm not in love. I just had very satisfying sex with a very beautiful woman. Even though I'm young, I'm smart enough to know that's all it is. I'm also smart enough to know that whatever is between us is temporary. She's twenty years older than me, and I'm only going to have this job long enough to get out of my current living situation. Realistically, she and I can enjoy each other for the summer. Then we have to move on.

But last night was a good night. A truly good night, unmarred by memories of death, fears for the future or hatred for the present. Good enough that when I get home and my mother gives me shit about being late, I don't feel any anger. She can't touch me right now, and that's a beautiful feeling.

I fall asleep, and my dreams are filled with Vivian. Her soft skin, her cool lips, her warm body, her eyes, her smile, everything. I might not be in love, but whatever I'm feeling has to be the next best thing.

It's not even just the sex that's so wonderful. She seems to actually care about me. Obviously, she knows as well as I do that this is just temporary, and both of us are



going to have to move on to our real lives when this is over, but she still truly cares about me. Honestly, the moments we spend lying in bed together and talking are just as good as the moments we spend... um, not talking.

When I leave, I stammer around the question of if I can see her again. She lets me make an idiot of myself for a few seconds, then kisses me just under my ear and whispers that I should come see her tomorrow night.

Needless to say, I am up bright and early the next morning. The heatwave peaks today, one hundred twenty-one degrees, but I bring a change of clothes to take to Vivian's, and if showering at her place is going to be as exciting every day, then I don't mind the heat.

I reach Autumn Downs, and Danny looks me up and down. "What's got into you? Your mom buy you a puppy or something?"

"Something, my man," I reply. "Definitely something."

He gives me a knowing look, then says, "Ah-ha. What's something's name?"

I'm so happy right now that I don't even care that he's being nosy. "Sorry, man. Can't kiss and tell, right?"

He nods conspiratorially. "Right. Well, good for you. Good-looking boy like you oughta have a girl on his arm."

"Thank you, Danny."

I drive away, still smiling, and head to my first client's house. According to the little info sheet Best Pool Cleaners gives me, she's seventy-two and widowed for three years. I feel a touch of empathy at that. I know how hard it is to lose a loved one.

Mrs. Winslow lives on the opposite side of Autumn Downs. The homes here are older, but no less grand for that. Still, their aesthetic is more muted than the bright, ostentatiousness of the newer homes, and I appreciate that.

Mrs. Winslow opens the door, and she is beautiful. Not in a Vivian Chase kind of way, obviously, but in a grandmotherly kind of way. She isn't dolled up with bad plastic surgery and worse makeup like so many of the women here, and she doesn't wear clothing that emphasizes how desperately she's trying to look younger. She looks beautiful the way old women used to look beautiful, with a classic, matronly and dignified appearance.

God, I'm all poetic today. It's amazing what a good night with a good woman will do.

"Good morning, Mrs. Winslow. I'm Nathan Harlow from Best Pool Cleaners."

"Well, good morning, young man! Don't you look handsome! And what a nice smile! Come on in, I've just finished making coffee."

"Oh, that's all right, Mrs. Winslow. I appreciate it, but I have a full schedule today—"

"Nonsense. You can spare ten minutes to keep an old woman company. Besides, I only have a very small pool. I don't really use it. It shouldn't take very long."

She leads me into a house that's decorated the way a grandmother would decorate her house. There are a lot of pictures, ceramic figurines, and houseplants, both real and fake. The kitchen is full of decorative salt shakers, oven mitts, jars of sugar, flour, pasta, spices—anything you can think of. The living room—which is where she leads me—contains a couch, an upholstered chair, and a coffee table made of hardwood that looks as old as Mrs. Winslow. The couch and chair have throw rugs and throw

pillows arranged in perfect symmetry, and the coffee table sits on a rug that is just this side of threadbare. About the only thing in the house that look modern is the tv, which is a seventy-five-inch Sony that probably cost close to five thousand dollars.

“Have a seat anywhere you like,” she says. “I’ll be right back with the coffee. How do you take it?”

“Black is fine, thank you.”

“Very manly of you. That’s good.”

That seems like an odd thing to say, but considering everything else that’s happened in this neighborhood, it actually ranks as one of the more normal things people have done.

When she leaves, I look nervously out the window at the pool. I do have a full schedule, so aside from the fact that I want to get to Vivian as fast as I possibly can, I really can’t spend a lot of time socializing.

Fortunately, the pool is indeed very small. It looks out of place in this house, let alone a neighborhood like Autumn Downs. It’s the old-fashioned peanut shape, maybe fifteen feet long and eight to ten feet wide. Shallow too. It’s filled with leaves, but the vacuum can get that taken care of quickly. I can finish it in twenty to thirty minutes.

Mrs. Winslow returns with the coffee. Mine is served in a brown and tan mug shaped like a honeypot. It’s cute. I decide I like Mrs. Winslow.

“So you’ve been here for three days now?” she asks.

“Today is my fourth day.”

“Ah. How do you like it so far?”

I weigh my answer carefully. “It’s... interesting.”

She laughs. “That’s certainly one way to put it. Tell me, who of our lovely cast of characters have you met so far?”

“Um... quite a few. I think I’ve had about thirty clients. By the end of the week, I’ll be up to ninety.”

“Well, that’s wonderful! You must be earning a lot of money. Are you going to school?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Where?”

“Cal State Long Beach.”

“Wonderful! That’s an excellent school. My husband used to teach there. They have a wonderful transfer program with UCLA. You should keep that in mind if you consider a graduate degree.” She looks over her glasses at me. “And you should. You seem a smart boy.”

“I’m thinking about it,” I say.

It’s not exactly a lie. I haven’t ruled out the idea of a graduate school. I just don’t know exactly what I want to do yet.”

“Have you declared your major yet?”

“Oh, um... I’m still kind of looking at things.”

“I see. You’re a sophomore this coming fall, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you’ll need to declare your major by spring. Don’t waste too much time. You can always start with a business degree and transition to another field later. It’s always a good idea to know how to manage your finances.”

“Good advice,” I say noncommittally. I remind myself that she’s old and probably has no one to talk to, so she’s taking advantage of the chance to talk to me.

“So you’ve heard about the Kensington girl.”

I blink, shocked by the sudden change of subject. “Um... yes. Tragic.”

She looks at me, and her expression is shrewd and almost cunning. I’ve seen that exact expression on too many faces in this neighborhood already. It’s a little unsettling. Hell, it’s a lot unsettling.

“Well,” I say, “I should get—”

“It’s horrible what Julian and Clara did to that poor girl.”

A chill runs through me. “Do you... do you think...”

“I make it my business not to jump to conclusions, dear,” Mrs. Winslow replies, “but I find it interesting that Lila’s death occurred so soon after the tabloids leaked her eating disorder. You know Julian is running for a city council position. I shouldn’t really ask such questions, but when I think of who might stand to benefit from Lila’s

death, I wonder if perhaps the sympathy of losing a child might outweigh the scandal of having a child with such a malady.”

She sips her coffee, her expression one of practiced nonchalance now. I decide I don’t like her nearly as much as I thought I did before.

Still, what she says makes an odd... sense? I don’t follow politics much. The way I see it is that if politicians wanted to make a difference, we’d see it, but they only want to make differences that benefit them. Poor people aren’t going to do anything for politicians, so why would they give a shit if we suffer?

But I know that image matters a lot and scandals truly do ruin careers. I don’t know why having a daughter who’s sick would ruin someone’s career, but after hearing the story Vivian tells me about Mrs. Cho and Mrs. Fletcher, I have an idea of how the minds of wealthy people work.

I stand and say again, “I should get going on the pool, Mrs. Winslow. Thank you for the coffee.”

She smiles at me. “Of course, dear. Thank you for keeping an old woman company.”

I smile, and it occurs to me that the genuine one I wear earlier is gone. I’m back to faking it.

I head out the door and hear, “Be careful with that Chase woman, Nathan. She’s not what she seems to be.”

I stop dead in my tracks. How does she know about that? How could she know about that? She lives on the other side of the neighborhood.

I turn back to her, but she’s looking away from me now, sipping her coffee. I open

my mouth to say something, but I can't think of anything to say, so I just head to the backyard and begin working.

Yeah, I definitely don't like Mrs. Winslow.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

I end up meeting Marco again for lunch. I'm still not sure how much time I should spend with him, but at least I know how to talk to him.

"Dude, people here are weird," he says in between bites of another overstuffed sub sandwich—this one meatball.

"Yeah, you can say that again," I reply in between bites of my equally overstuffed Italian club.

"Everyone here hates each other," he continues. "Like, seriously, every house I go to, they're always talking shit on each other. I just did this woman's garden—"

"That's what she said."

He grins and points his finger at me, then says, "So I was doing her garden, and she comes out and starts talking shit on another woman, Mrs. Cho. Says that Cho keeps trying to fuck her husband or whatever, and she thinks it's because her own husband—Cho's husband—can't get it up anymore."

"Mrs. Fletcher."

"Yeah! Mrs. Fletcher! You know her too!"

"Yep. Classy lady."

He shrugs. "Honestly, I don't even know anymore. It's like, how can you tell who's good and who's not? I mean, if I were Mr. Fletcher, I wouldn't be looking anywhere



else but Janice's big double-Ds, but who knows? Maybe he likes 'em petite."

I smile wryly. Classic Marco, only focusing on one thing.

"But anyway, I'm like, why are you telling me? Like I'm just pouring dirt into the ground and pulling weeds, you know? I don't need to know about all that shit. Like, if you're asking me to help get him back, then sure, I'll be right inside, if you know what I mean, but if you're just like gossiping, then, like, what am I supposed to do about it."

"I think they talk to us because they can't talk to anyone else. Not honestly, anyway."

"Like, we're nobodies, so they can dump all their shit on us without worrying that we're going to use it against them, huh?"

"Exactly."

He shakes his head. "Well, I guess it means the job isn't boring."

I think of Vivian's eyes staring into mine as she warps her arms around me. I hear the soft moans and sighs she releases in my ear. "No. Not boring at all."

"So have you banged anyone yet?"

I sigh and take another bite of my sandwich.

"You totally did! Who was it? Did you bang Mrs. Fletcher? You did, didn't you!"

I roll my eyes. "Yes, Marco. I banged Mrs. Fletcher."

He laughs and says, "Nah, she isn't your style. You're not into big titties. Did you

bang Mrs. Cho?”

“Yep. Her too.”

“Maybe you should. Give her something other than a married man to put her eyes on. You’d be doing her and Mrs. Fletcher both a favor.”

“Dude, you seriously need to get a life.”

“What’s wrong with my life? I get to drive a nice truck, listen to MILFs complain about their husbands and then go home to real life with the best stories to tell.”

“Whatever makes you happy, man.”

“Seriously, who did you screw?”

“Your sister.”

He laughs again. “Hey, that’s fucked up, man. You know she likes you too.”

“Aranza? She hates me, what are you talking about?”

“Nah, bro, she only pretends to hate you because she thinks you’re cute. She told me.”

”Are you trying to convince me to sleep with her?”

He looks at me sideways. “Look at you being all fancy. ‘Sleep with her.’ Damn, you grew up all the way, didn’t you?”

I think of the needle pushing into my arm two nights ago and resist the urge to

scratch. “Trying to.”

“Why, though?”

I feel a rant coming on, but before I can try to deflect him, he tilts his head at the houses in front of us. “Look at all these people, bro. They’re grown up. They’ve got big houses, nice cars, rich husbands, bombshell wives: they’ve got it made, bro. And they fucking hate themselves. I’ll be honest with you, bro. When I came here, I was just looking to find some lonely heart to spend time with, maybe a few old ladies who weren’t careful where they left their jewelry boxes.” I control my reaction to that one. “But now that I’m here? Fuck it, bro. I don’t want anything these people have. It’s crazy, but like seeing how rich people live almost makes me glad I’m poor. You know what I mean?”

I think of my mom, probably halfway through her second bottle of vodka. I think of my room and the beer, pills and heroin stashed there.

Then I think of Lila Kensington, face down in her pool because her eating disorder was too much for Daddy’s political career.

“Yeah. I know what you mean.”

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Vivian’s hand grips my shoulder hard, and her body tenses, then shudders.

“Yes!” she cries out. “Oh God!”

I reach my own climax and bury my head in her neck as my cries join hers. We lay there for a long moment, gasping and shaking as our bodies come down from a high better than anything that ever came out of a needle.

When I feel her relax completely, I roll over. She moans again when we separate, and we lay next to each other while we finish catching our breath.

She puts her hand across her body and pats my chest. “Good job, Nate. Damn.”

I can’t help myself. I start laughing at that. She joins me a moment later, and we spend another moment letting the emotional high replace the physical one.

Then she rolls over and kisses me deeply. I feel my body start to respond, but I don’t make a move. The emotional high soars to the clouds, and I want to cling to that feeling.

When she pulls away, she stays above me, smiling and stroking my hair. “I was afraid you wouldn’t come back,” she says finally. “I’m glad you did.”

I stare up at her in amazement. “Why on Earth wouldn’t I come back?”

She giggles and rolls off of me and off the bed. I stare at her as she pulls on her underwear and a silk robe. “I guess you’re right. I forget sometimes that you’re only nineteen. All I have to do is answer the door looking like this, and you’ll do pretty much anything I want.”

I know she’s only teasing, but something about the way she says that makes me uneasy. The feeling vanishes quickly though. It’s pretty much impossible to feel bad after what we just did.

She looks over her shoulder at me and smiles wryly. “We can come back here later,” she said, “but I feel like talking right now, so get up. We’re going to the couch.”

I grin and hop off the bed, pulling on my boxers and t-shirt. “We don’t have to come back to the bed.”

She laughs again. “Right. You’re only nineteen. I forgot again.”

We head to the living room and Vivian pours us each another glass of Chardonnay. I sip, and the warmth almost immediately returns to my body. This is my third glass already. I think I’m starting to like wine.

“Have the cops talked to you again?” she asks, sitting next to me and pulling her feet up under her. It’s an oddly adorable movement, and I feel a surge of affection for her that isn’t entirely sexual.

“Not yet.”

“Really? I’m surprised. I figured they’d finger you for the killer.” Seeing my shocked expression, she rolls her eyes. “Obviously I’m glad they didn’t, but still... rich homeowners versus dirt-poor pool boy.”

“I’m glad to know that’s how you think of me,” I say.

She rolls her eyes again. “I just let you screw me, and I told you you could do it again in a few minutes. Clearly, I like you.”

“Or you just like what I can do to you.”

“I do,” she says, nodding to emphasize the statement. “I very much do.” She shoves me playfully. “But I also like you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes! God, but not if you’re going to be so needy.”

She smiles at me when she says it, but I decide she means it a little too. I laugh and

say, “Well, anyway, I’m glad I’m off the hook. I can’t afford a lawyer, and a public defender’s just going to tell me to plead no contest.”

She gives me a fishy look. “You sound like you know what you’re talking about.”

Shit. “I mean, that’s what they do to poor people, right?”

“Right.” She keeps the fishy look on me a moment later, then says, “Can I tell you something crazy and have you not throw it in my face?”

“You can have me do pretty much anything you want right now.”

She chuckles and says, “Yep. Nineteen. Gotta remember that.” Her smile fades a little. “I think Clara might have killed Lila.” She looks at me expectantly, and when I don’t react with surprise, her eyes widen. “You think so too. Do you... do you know something?”

“I don’t even know what I know or don’t know anymore,” I say honestly. “But if I know anything, I know the Kensingtons are fucked up. Both of them.”

“Oh yes, both of them. But her more so.”

“Why do you say that?”

Vivian laughs. It’s not a pleasant laugh, and for a split second, she makes a face that looks actually ugly to me. I don’t want to see her like that, so I push the thought away.

”She”s an old-school Hollywood starlet. The moment her looks turned, she turned. Straight to drugs.”

“How do you know?”

“Let’s just say this isn’t the first time the police have been to her house. Have you heard her talking to herself yet?”

I grimace. “No. Seriously?”

“Oh yeah. There’s a reason she almost never leaves the house.”

“I didn’t know she almost never left the house.”

“Well, she does. Or doesn’t. However, you want to say it. Julian married her because he was young, and she was pretty, and like most Hollywood starlets, uninhibited. He thought he’d won the jackpot, and so what if she liked pushing things up her nose every now and then? I think he figured she’d grow out of it.”

I scoff. “You don’t grow out of shit like that.”

She gives me a fishy look again. “No. You don’t.”

I realize I’ve stepped in it again, so I say, “So you think that she snorted a little too much and had a bad moment with Lila?”

“I don’t know. But she could have. Or Julian could have decided that Lila was in the way, and maybe if he got rid of her, Clara would go back to getting on her knees whenever he wanted her to.”

I grimace again. “Really? You think he’d kill his daughter to get sex?”

“I think he’d do anything to get power,” she said.

She fell silent, and I tried to digest what she said. Before I could wrap my head around it, though, she downed the rest of her wine and said, “but enough about that. It occurs to me that I haven’t gotten on my knees for you yet.”

My heartbeat instantly quickens. “Oh?” I say.

She giggles and stands up. “Oh?” she mocks.

She leans over me, and I feel my body begin to respond. She smiles slightly, then kisses me softly.

Then she kisses my throat. Then my chest. Then my navel just above my belly button.

Then she gets on her knees, and once more, I forget about everything but Vivian.



“Again?”

“Yep. They called us last night.”

“I was just there three days ago.”

“Yeah, well...” Ahmed hesitates, apparently trying to decide how much to tell me.

“Do you watch the news?”

“Yeah, I watch it.”

“Well... that’s why they want you to clean the pool again.”

I know damn well that’s why the Kensingtons want me to clean the pool. That doesn’t mean I want to go back. And why would they want me back, anyway? Don’t they know...

No. They don’t know. If they don’t know, it means the cops didn’t tell them. If the cops didn’t tell them, it means...

What does it mean? Why wouldn’t they tell the parents I was the one who found her? Do they suspect the parents too? Do they still suspect me?

I think a little more and come to another conclusion. This has been all over the news. My van was parked in front of the Kensingtons’ house. Considering how damned nosy everyone is, there’s no way no one saw me there with the cops. Why would no one mention to anyone that I was there?

I can understand why Vivian wouldn't. But no one else? None of the next-door neighbors? No one passing by? What the hell have I walked into?

"They're going to pay triple," Ahmed says. "And don't worry about your other clients. I moved them up an hour."

"There's no one else who can do it? I have twelve clients today."

"Thirteen," Ahmed says. "What's the problem? Have a hot date tonight?"

I don't, actually. Vivian's going to be out of town today. Something about needing to go to a courthouse in San Jose to deal with a property dispute between her and her ex. She's not coming back until tomorrow morning.

I just really don't want to go back to that house.

"I'll let you keep half the extra money," Ahmed says. "You're not going to get a better deal than that."

He's right. I'll basically be making four times what I normally make. That's a lot more money than I can sneeze at. Even with a dead body on the line.

But... "They asked for me specifically?"

Ahmed leans back and laughs. "That's funny. No, they didn't ask for you specifically. These are rich people, son. They probably won't even realize you're the same guy who was there four days ago. They called us, and that's your territory, so I'm giving it to you because I thought you'd like the chance to make a lot more money. I didn't expect you'd be suspicious over a dead girl. You know it happens to everyone eventually, right?"

“Yeah. Right.” I take the keys and offer a half-hearted smile. “Thanks, Ahmed.”

“Don’t mention it, kid. Hey, loosen up a little, too. Life is short. Don’t make it so damned dreary.”

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“Police announced this morning that the death of nineteen-year-old Lila Kensington has been ruled an accident...”

“What? That’s bullshit!”

“...was discovered dead when police officers arrived to perform a wellness check after an anonymous tip...”

That really is bullshit. But it’s good for me, right? People think a neighbor called it in, and no one’s even thinking that I could be responsible. Good news, isn’t it?

Except it makes no sense. That cop looked awfully suspicious of me. Why would she look at me the way she did, then never call me again? Did she confirm my alibi somehow?

I guess she could have. She would have a timeframe for Lila’s death. If it was proven she died hours earlier, say, before the security cameras at the gate of the neighborhood picked me up, then they could have determined that there was no way I could be there.

As far as Julian and Clara, that’s shitty, but I understand it. Mistakes don’t cost rich people, even when those mistakes get other people killed. You can drown your daughter, and as long as you have a decent cover, you get to escape. You can run over a kid on her way home from the convenience store, but as long as you can pay for a

lawyer, the police will manage not to find your vehicle.

“It’s fucking bullshit.”

Lila’s smile comes to my mind. The slightly sad, slightly lonely, but upbeat and quirky expression she wore when she teased me. She was a good girl. I’m sure she had her problems, but as far as problems go, having an eating disorder is a) not her fault, and b) a hell of a lot better than a lot of other things. She didn’t deserve to be thrown out like trash, and the people responsible don’t deserve to get away with it.

Settle down, kid. You don’t know that Clara and Julian are responsible.

I don’t, but Vivian seems to think so, and so does Mrs. Winslow. I know that Clara is a liar because of her little spiel about the pool party that never happened. I know that things were rocky in the Kensington house because of the spat she and Julian have had.

It’s not a lot, but it’s enough to raise my suspicions. At the very least, the cops need to do a little more digging before they just throw the case away.

I sigh. Shitty as it is, it really isn’t my problem. I need to let this go.

Except that’s what they did with Annie, and now my family’s a broken mess, me included.

I park in front of the Kensington home and take several deep breaths to try to calm myself. I close my eyes, but when I do that, I see Lila’s body face down in the pool, so I open them again and stare out the window.

Finally, I decide that putting it off isn’t going to help anything. I get out of the van and head to the front door.

I hope desperately that they won't be home and I can use that as an excuse not to clean their pool again. A horrible thought occurs to me that I don't know what I'll find in the pool. I didn't get close to Lila's body. As soon as I saw her, I just ran out of there. I could walk in and see blood or vomit or—

The door opens, and Clara is there. Her eyes are wide and wild, and her pupils are as big around as a Coke can, pun absolutely intended.

She grins at me, revealing rows of teeth that are far too white to be natural, especially in the mouth of a long-term drug user. "Hi! Nick, right?"

"Nate. It's..." I almost say it's good to see you, but that would be a lie, and anyway, I don't know if it's what a grieving mother would want to hear. Assuming she is grieving.

"Clara," she says, mistaking my hesitation. "Come on in."

I blink. "Oh, um, that's okay. I—"

"Oh, nonsense. Just me here today. Julian's off somewhere being a superman or some bullshit!" She laughs briefly, nervously and walks inside, gesturing for me to follow. "Come on! I won't bite."

I bring the cleaning equipment with me, hoping to preempt any conversation and get straight to work. Just to make it clear I'm on a schedule, I say, "If you don't mind, ma'am, I'm going to get started. I have a lot of houses to get to today, and I want to make sure I have enough time to clean things to your satisfaction."

"Of course, of course. We can talk while you work."

My heart begins to pound. Talk? About what?

“Here.” She throws open a sliding glass door and moans luxuriously as she steps outside. “Oh God, it’s a beautiful day. I’m going to sunbathe.”

She pulls her shorts down, and I start to shout a protest when I see that underneath her shorts and shirt she’s wearing a black one-piece swimsuit that looks flattering on her but also almost modest. I release a sigh of relief and say, “If you’d like, ma’am, I can come back at another rtime.”

“No, no! Please, make yourself at home!”

She’s giddy. I wouldn’t say she’s happy, per se, but she’s definitely not grieving. Coke wouldn’t do that. Coke makes people intense, it doesn’t make them giddy. Maybe she’s on ecstasy.

Or maybe she’s happy that her daughter is dead.

I set my equipment down and try not to look at the pool. Unfortunately, it’s pretty damned hard to clean a pool without looking at it, so I eventually have to poke my head up.

It’s pristine. I mean spotless. I don’t just mean I cleaned it a few days ago, and it’s still clean. I mean someone cleaned this pool within the past twenty-four hours and they did a hell of a lot more than rake out leaves and switch a pool filter. The walls themselves look like they’ve been scrubbed. I don’t see a speck of dirt in there.

Why am I here? Does Clara just want someone else to witness that there’s no sign of foul play in the pool? No, that makes no sense. The police ruled Lila’s death an accident.

“Everything okay, Nate?”

I realize I'm staring and smile. "Fine. The pool looks pretty good, so I think I'll just start another pool treatment and you should be good to do."

"Good. It smells like death."

I look up at her and see her uncorking a bottle of wine. I look to the left and see white lines on the table next to a mirror and a straw. My blood begins to boil. The damned bitch didn't even bother to hide her drugs.

I don't know why that infuriates me so much. It's a bit hypocritical of me to care how she uses her drugs. But seeing the evidence right there makes me imagine a coke-fueled Clara attacking Lila, snarling as her fingers dig into her daughter's throat.

"You shouldn't mix coke and alcohol," I say.

Clara stiffens and spins toward me, face white.

"It's bad for your heart," I finish.

She begins to shake slightly, staring at me with a look akin to terror. Then she charges me and shouts, "How dare you speak to me like that! Who the fuck do you think you are? You think just because Lila thought you were hot that you can tell me what to do in my own home? Get the fuck out of here! You know what? I'm calling your boss. I'm going to get you fired."

She stalks back to her table and reaches for her phone. I don't know what comes over me. Instead of stammering an apology and begging her not to do that, I say, "I wonder how people would react if they knew you mixed coke and champagne? Did you mix them when Lila died?"

She pauses with her hand over her phone. After a moment, she slowly sets the phone

down and looks at me. Her lips are trembling, but her pupils are no longer dilated. Apparently, you really can scare someone sober.

“Get the fuck out,” she says softly.

I smile at her. “Have a nice day, ma’am.”

I leave, heart pounding, legs shaking. I might have just gotten myself fired. Hell, I might have just gotten myself killed.

But I feel even better than I did. Vivian walked into the shower with me and told me she couldn’t wait.

I text Ahmed that there’s been a family emergency, and I have to take the morning off. I’ll make up the clients I miss on my next day off.

Then I drive straight toward the nearest police station.



*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

“Hey, Lena, got a minute?”

Lena wished wholeheartedly that she could tell Harris she didn’t, but unfortunately, she had a lot of minutes right now. She’d probably have a lot of minutes for the next several months thanks to the way she mouthed off to Captain Slater after the Kensington case was dropped.

One of these days, she’d learn not to be a hero.

“Sure, Harris. Why not? Come on in. What ya got for me?”

“It’s the pool boy from the Kensington Place. He wants to talk to you.”

Lena instantly came to full alertness. “Harlow?”

“The same.”

“Send him in.”

“You want me to sit in on it with you?”

“No, that’s okay. I want you focused on the drive-by in the Hills.”

“Sounds good.”

Harris looked relieved. Unlike Lena, he was happy to have Lila Kensington’s death taken off of their plate. Like Lena, he was less than overjoyed to be working a case

with a wealthy victim and two wealthy suspects. Unlike Lena, he'd been able to let Lila's death roll off of his back.

Lena had been kicking herself for not interviewing the pool boy again when she had the chance. Now, fate had given her a chance to remedy that mistake.

Nate Harlow walked in, his face an odd mixture of grim determination and powerful anxiety. Lena was sure suddenly that he'd had experience with the cops. She wondered why.

He lifted his right hand and absently scratched at the inside of his left elbow. Lena followed the movement and saw the tracks. Ah. That was why.

She smiled at him. "Mr. Harlow. Thanks for coming to talk to me."

"Just call me Nate."

"And you can just call me Lena."

He looked at her suspiciously and didn't answer.

She gestured to the chair in front of her desk. "Have a seat."

He sat and fidgeted nervously, knees bouncing a little.

She sat behind her desk and said, "So, what did you have to tell me?"

He took a deep breath and released it slowly. She waited patiently while he worked up the courage to tell her what was on his mind.

"I don't think Lila's death was accidental," he finally said. "I think she was

murdered.”

Jackpot.

“What makes you think that?”

“Um...” his eyes shifted to the left. “I don’t know. I just have a feeling.”

“You get that one chance to lie to me,” Lena replied calmly. “I hope you enjoyed it. Because the next time you lie to me, I’ll send officers to raid your apartment and find a reason to drug test you and pass that information along to your employers.”

Nate paled. “All right. God. It’s not that easy, okay?”

“I don’t care.” He stared at her in disbelief, and she said. “You came here to help me solve a young woman’s murder. That matters a lot more to me than your habits.”

“I don’t do that anymore.”

“I still don’t care. Why do you think that Lila Kensington was murdered?”

“Because...” he hesitated a moment longer, then said, “I get a bad feeling about her parents. Especially her mother.”

“What kind of feeling?”

“I don’t know, like... like she’s not in control of herself.”

“Can you give me an example?”

“Um...”

His eyes shifted again, and Lena guessed at his worry. “I can make sure that no one knows you talked to me. A lot of people know that I was unhappy with closing the case. Anyone who asks is going to think I started snooping again. All you need to do is tell me where to look.”

He thought a moment, then said, “I caught her doing drugs.”

Double jackpot.

“What kind of drugs?”

“Cocaine.”

“Powder or rock?”

“Powder. She was snorting it.”

“Did she talk about Lila at all?”

“No. Not until I called her out for doing the drugs. Then she threatened to get me fired.”

So Clara, the weeping mother who could barely speak three days ago, didn’t mention her daughter at all.

“How would you describe her mood when you talked to her?”

“She seemed... happy. It was weird.”

“What do you mean happy? Like coked out happy?”

He shook his head. “No, coke won’t make you happy. It might make you more energetic, but it won’t make you happy.”

He caught himself and looked at her warily. You’ve got a past kid, Lena thought.

“So you said you confronted her about her drug use. Anything else?”

“Yeah. She got crazy and threatened to have me fired.”

“Did she?”

“Yes. I just told you.”

”No, I mean, did she just call your bluff, or did she back off?”

“She backed off. I...” he hesitated again, but this time Lena didn’t need to ask him to keep going. “I asked her what people would think if I told everyone that she was a drunk coke addict. She put the phone down and just kicked me out, but she didn’t call anyone.”

Lena leaned back in her chair and regarded Nate for a minute. The kid was obviously using. Not coke. Probably heroin or fentanyl. He was familiar with coke, though.

And he was at the Kensington house for the third time in the past week. Lena was inclined to believe he was telling the truth about Clara, but she was not inclined to think he was doing this out of the goodness of his heart.

“What were you doing at the Kensington house again?”

“They wanted me to clean the pool again. Because... you know.”

“Hmm. So this encounter with Mrs. Kensington happened when you were cleaning their pool?”

“Well, I didn’t actually clean the pool. I was about to when she kicked me out.”

“So if I go back to their house, I’m going to see a dirty pool.”

He shook his head. “No, it was spotless. Like, super clean.”

“So they called you to clean a pool that was already clean?”

”Yeah, I guess that...” his eyes widened. ”Wait, they really did! I promise! You can call me...” his eyes shifted again. ”Actually, please don’t call my boss. I don’t want them to know that I’m mixed up in this.” His brow furrowed. ”Why didn’t you call them? I mean earlier, why didn’t you tell anyone that I was a suspect.”

“You weren’t a suspect.”

He didn’t buy it. “You sure talked to me like I was.”

“I talked to you like you weren’t telling me everything. And you weren’t.”

“Yes, I was. I told you that I found Lila in the pool, ran out of there and called you.”

“You didn’t tell me that you suspected Clara of being involved.”

He frowned. “Well, you’re the detective. It’s not my job to solve this case for you.”

“So why are you here now?”

“Because...” he sighed. “Because it sucks. They killed Lila, and they’re just going to

get away with it because they're rich." He met her eyes, and the accusation in his was strong enough that Lena flinched slightly. "You know that wasn't a damned accident."

Yes, I do.

She sighed and tapped her desk. "I'm going to be honest with you, Nate. I don't know if I believe you. I mean, I believe some of what you're saying, but there's a lot you're not saying that you should, and there are a few things you're telling me that you don't realize you're telling me. So here's where I'm sitting: I have a kid who shows up out of nowhere, who's clearly on drugs."

He flinched. "I'm not high!"

"Not now, but you have been very recently. Not all of those tracks on your arm are old."

He flinched again and crossed his arms.

"So I have a kid who's clearly on drugs, who is experienced enough that he can tell immediately that someone's using drugs—"

"I saw the coke on the damned table!"

"Let me finish. You show up out of nowhere, and Lila Kensington dies. Then, after the death is ruled an accident, you show up in my office and claim that Clara's a junkie and probably killed her daughter. Maybe everything you're saying is true. Maybe Clara did kill Lila. Certainly, she didn't help keep her alive.

"The big question here is how do you fit into all of this."

“I don’t! For God’s sake, I just started this job!”

“I know. I just wonder what you were doing before.”

“What do you mean? I was...” There go those eyes again.

“Selling drugs?”

“No!”

She lifted her hand. “Okay. But this is where I get confused. Lila Kensington is an honor roll student in high school. She gets a full ride to UCLA and is comfortably top of her class in every subject. Then last semester rolls around. Her grades start slipping. She starts getting into fights.”

“I didn’t know about that.”

“Let me finish. Her parents pull her out of the dorms and start keeping her home. Stop letting her friends see her. Supposedly, she has an eating disorder, but they keep that under wraps. Then, out of nowhere, a kid her age shows up who’s clearly got a habit. Next thing I know, Lila’s dead and Mom is coked out, and new kid is somehow at the house for both of those events.”

“So you think I sold them drugs? That’s it?”

“You said it, not me.”

“All right.” Nate stood up. “I was just trying to help, but clearly you only care about rich people. Just like all fucking cops.”

“Hold on.”



“No, fuck you. You want to pin this on me? Go ahead. I’m sure you can figure out where to find me. But Clara Kensington killed Lila, and if you give a single shit about actual justice, you’ll look at her again. But hey, what do I know? I’m just a poor junkie.”

He stormed out of the office, and Lena let him leave. Harris came in a moment later. “That looked bad.”

“Maybe.” She tapped her desk again. “I’m going to have to take a rain check on dinner tonight, Damien.”

Harris frowned. “Don’t get pulled down a rabbit hole, Lena. The case is over.”

She smiled. “You want to catch a bunny, you have to dive down a few holes.”

“Your dry humor needs work,” he said. “Do what you want. You get yourself fired, it’s another step up the ladder for me.”

He left, and Lena leaned back in her desk. She stared up at the ceiling for a moment, then opened her web browser and typed Clara Kensington into the search box.

Harris was right. She was risking her career digging into something the department considered buried.

But it was too late. She was already down the hole.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

I'm pissed when I leave the police station. I should have known better than to go to the fucking cops. Of course, they would zero in on me. Forget Clara acting like an insane banshee. Forget Julian looking like a sociopath. No, it must be the dirty little pool boy with the rap sheet.

My left arm itches again, and I sigh and slap the steering wheel. It's my damned fault. Of course, the first thing I do when I walk into the police station is start scratching my fucking elbow.

Goddamned heroin. Goddamned needle. Stupid fucking dreams of dead sisters and naked women and fucking bullshit.

"Fuck!"

I glance to my left to see the woman in the lane next to me staring at me warily. I smile and wave, which does the opposite of calm her nerves. The light turns and she speeds off, leaving the crazy kid in the work van behind her.

I can't believe I actually went to the cops. What a fucking idiot. What did I think they were going to do, decide to go after the rich people after all? Did I forget what happened with Annie?

It's just unfair. Annie and now Lila. Lila's not even poor, but because her parents are rich and still alive, she's just an inconvenience to the cops like Annie was.

It's just bullshit. It's all bullshit. Lila was murdered, and no one's doing anything to figure out why but me.

An idea occurs to me. It's a bad idea. No, it's a terrible idea. I've had some really shitty ideas before, but I think I can say honestly that this is the worst idea I've ever had.

But I'm going to do it anyway. Someone has to do this. Someone has to care that Lila was murdered.

I think of Lila's playful smile, her sarcasm, the look in her eyes when she teased me about catching her in her underwear. Maybe it's silly of me, but I felt like maybe she and I could have had something.

Yeah, that is silly. But that doesn't mean it's not true. She liked me. I mean, it sure seemed like she did. And who knows? Maybe once I had a while to sleep on it, I wouldn't have been so afraid of losing my job just because a legal adult happened to have parents who thought of me as a servant.

I think of Vivian and feel a touch of guilt, but let's be real. Vivian's twenty years older than me. There's no future with her. There could have been a future with Lila. Hell, there could have been something.

Or maybe nothing. Maybe I'm just imagining all of this. I'll never know now.

And you know what? Forget about all that. Someone needs to care that Lila was murdered even if she and I would never have been anything together.

I head back to Autumn Downs and get there just in time to finish my afternoon clients. I get a text from Ahmed that two of my clients are pissed at me for rescheduling on short notice, so I tell him that I'll take care of them tonight after the afternoon clients are done and take care of the other four on my next day off.

That works for him, and it works for me because it gives me a reason to be here after

dark.

I manage to get through the afternoon without going insane, which is a miracle. I also manage to avoid talking to crazy rich people and old friends with criminal history.

I'm grateful for being able to avoid conversation. I've just about had it with talking to people in this neighborhood. Everything is games and lies and deception with them. Even Vivian talks like she's playing some sort of political game, and she has to weigh every word she releases. The only person I've talked to in this damned place who isn't playing games is Lila, and she's dead now.

Well, I'm going to find out who killed her. I'm going to prove it, and I'm going to give the police one more chance to do their job. If they don't, I'll do it for them.

You're being an idiot, Nate. What are you going to do? Break into the Kensington's house and stab them to death?

"If I have to," I mutter to myself.

"What was that?"

I catch myself and smile at Mr. Ruhl. "Nothing. You're all set, sir. I look forward to being of service to you again soon."

He nods and offers me a disinterested smile. "Take care."

Oh, I will.

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I park the van in the community park two blocks over from the Kensington. It's dark

out now, so there's literally no one outside. I could probably have parked right in front of their house. Still, since I'm apparently suspecto numero uno now, I decide it's a good idea to at least exercise some caution.

"Yeah, you're breaking into their house again, dipshit. Don't act like you're being careful."

My blood boils at that. Damn it, someone has to care. It has to matter to someone. She was a person, for fuck's sake.

Lila or Annie?

"Both of them," I say aloud again. "This is for both of them."

Bullshit. This is for yourself.

"Yeah, whatever."

I reach the street behind the Kensingtons' house and look around. The windows are all dark, and there's no one else outside. I walk in between two homes and end up behind the Kensingtons' house.

There's a light on in their house, so I slip back into the shadows and wait. My heart pounds. It's been a long time since I've broken into anyone's house.

I only did this a few times back when I was using. When business with Arturo was light, and I ran out of money for a fix, I would break into apartments and steal drugs if I could find them and cash if I couldn't.

I didn't like it. Boosting an empty car is one thing. Walking into someone's home when they're sleeping inside of it is another. It's a miracle I've never been shot.

But I have to do this. For Lila.

The door opens, and I hear Julian and Clara talking and laughing. I can't see them well from this distance, but I can see that Julian has his hand on Clara's ass, and she's leaning on him with her chest pushed forward so he can see her tits push out. Evidently, offing the kid is working wonders for their marriage.

They get in their car and drive away, just as merry as can be.

I wait until their lights disappear, then get to work.

Apartments in Cudahy don't usually have security cameras or alarms, but ten-million-dollar houses in West Hollywood usually do, so my first step is to walk around the house and see what I'm looking at.

I count three cameras and spot a sign that announces that this home is proudly protected by Advanced Security Systems. That means they'll have entry alarms at the doors, but probably not the windows. Most people with real security hire commercial firms, not residential firms. ASS is a residential security firm, so chances are there's only a basic level of protection.

I hop the fence to the backyard. The camera faces the fence door, and there's a large blind spot that I use to make my way to the back just below Lila's bedroom window. I jump and catch the balcony rail, then pull myself up.

I take a moment to pray the glass door isn't locked. I brought a glass cutter just in case, but I'd rather this was easy.

I plant my fingertips on the door and pull. To my great relief, it slides open easily. I step into the room and leave the door open.

Looking around Lila's room breaks my heart. There's a stuffed kitten on the bed and vanity mirror with selfies, notes from friends and pictures of celebrities tucked in between the glass and the frame. There's a closet with at least twenty pairs of shoes and a pile of dirty clothes on the floor in one corner. The laptop is decorated with stickers of unicorns and puppies and cartoon images of shirtless surfers.

It's a rich girl's room, but it's a girl's room. It's normal. Just a normal girl hoping for a normal life who now won't get any life.

I look around for something that could prove that Clara and Julian are the ones who killed her. Clara's too far over the cuckoo's nest to tell her ass from a kangaroo, but Julian's probably smart enough to make sure there's nothing in the house that would incriminate him. I'd bet anything he was the one who cleaned the pool.

But neither of them would think to check Lila's room. Lila was nothing to them. It wouldn't occur to them that she might have suspected them of evil motives or that she might have recorded things they said or did that could prove that they weren't innocent.

Maybe I just hope that's the case. Maybe I'm wrong about all of this and Lila really did just slip and hit her head.

But I doubt it.

I carefully open drawers and look through dressers. I check under the bed and in the bathroom. I check the closet, and just when I'm about to give this up for a waste of time, I find a notebook on the top shelf of her closet pushed all the way back to the corner.

I pull it out and see the word DIARY on the front.

Jackpot.

I look through the diary, and my heart breaks again. I can see her journey from hopeful, vibrant teenager to anxious, frightened drug user to disillusioned, dejected junkie. She was using. Not coke or heroin. Percocet. She got some from a friend and never looked back. Or rather, she looked back constantly, but she had ridden the wagon too far to get off the train.

I know how that feels.

Near the end, I find what I'm looking for. My eyes widen when I read the secrets she puts down about both Clara and Julian. Clara's are pretty mundane. She's a junkie and an alcoholic and has been since as long as Lila can remember. She's also cheated on Julian with numerous men. Pretty standard stuff based on what I've seen of the neighborhood so far.

But Julian's secrets are a different kind entirely. Some of the stuff in here is like mob business. People disappearing, money coming out of nowhere, stone faced men with dark sunglasses showing up and staying for hours.

It's not enough to convict them, but it should be enough to get the police to look. If they care to look, anyway.

The last entry of the dialogue is the worst. Not because of what it says about Lila's parents, though. In fact, it doesn't mention them at all.

Met a guy today. Nate. He was cleaning the pool, and I left the window open so he'd see me in my underwear. I know, I know, I'm such a tease! Whatever. He was cute. Omg, you should have seen how nervous he was when I told him I caught him. He thought I was going to get him fired! So funny.



I think I'll call him tomorrow. I got his number from Mom's phone. Maybe I'll see if I can get him alone and let him see me out of my underwear. Oh, whatever, diary. He's cute, and he's nice, and most guys are only one of the two. Besides, maybe if he likes me, I won't need to pop pills to feel good anymore.

Anyway, here's hoping. Night, diary. Love you XXOOXO.

A tear falls on the last line and smears the last X and O. It takes me a moment to realize it came from my eyes.

Just a girl. Just a poor girl who was trying to hold on in a world that doesn't give a shit. And they took that from her.

I put the diary in my jacket and zip it up. Then I leave the way I came.

As I walk back to the van, my tears dry and my jaw hardens.

I'm going to get justice for you, Lila. I'm going to get these assholes back for what they did. I promise.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

I'm walking down a sidewalk at night. Not in Autumn Downs, but in Encino. I'm in the old neighborhood where I used to live. I'm holding hands with Lila, and we're talking and laughing. I don't know what we're talking about, but it doesn't matter. I'm with her, and it feels good to be with her.

She's wearing tight jeans and sneakers and a long-sleeved striped hoodie. Her hair is pulled back in a ponytail. She shivers, and I put my arm around her shoulders. She leans against me, and I feel warm and happy.

She looks up at me and smiles. It's a good smile. It's not a sexual smile, and it's not a sad smile. It's just a smile. She's just happy to be with me.

I smile back and kiss her. Her lips are soft and cool. When I pull away, she wraps her arms around me and hugs me tightly.

We walk to a park, and I see a woman waiting for me on a bench. I don't want to see her, but I start walking toward her. I don't know why I do, but I can't stop myself.

Lila tries to stop me. She grabs my arm and pulls me back, looking pleadingly at me. I know I should listen to her. I want to listen to her.

But I can't. Something about that woman on the bench draws me, and I can't pull away. I pull free of Lila's grasp and ignore her cries of warning.

The woman on the bench lifts her head, and I see that it's Vivian. She smiles at me and stands, opening her trench coat to reveal her naked body.

The scene shifts, and I'm in bed with Vivian. She's moaning beneath me and moving her body deliciously under mine. I feel desperation and ecstasy course through my body meanwhile panic and revulsion course through my mind.

I don't want this. Why don't I want this? When I'm awake, I want her so badly I can barely breathe. Why don't I want this now?

Vivian's movements quicken. Her hand lifts to grip my shoulder. She bucks her hips, opens her mouth and cries out, "Annie!"

And instantly, I'm in the street in front of my old house again. Mom is on the ground, cradling Annie's body in her arms. She's weeping.

Annie turns to look at me, but it's not Annie. It's Lila. She looks at me, and her eyes are filmy and gray with death.

"They killed me," she says. "You need to stop them, Nate. You need to stop them before they get away with it."

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I wake up with a cry and start shivering almost instantly. My breath comes in rapid gulps, and my hands start to tremble. The shakes get bad enough that I curl up into a ball and hug myself, teeth clicking from a cold that no heatwave can cut through.

Damn it, I need to use.

I get to a sitting position but stop there.

I can't do this. I can't use the drugs. I can't let myself turn to heroin every time I have a nightmare.

But God, this nightmare.

I curl back into a fetal position and rock from side to side, weeping softly.

I hate that they took Lila from me. I hate that I'll never know what could have been between us. Vivian is fun, but that's all she is. That's all she can be. With Lila, I could have had a future.

I hate that I'm overthinking that. I hate myself for being selfish and thinking of what I could have had with her instead of what she could have had if she were allowed to live.

But that diary proved that there was something there. That little moment we shared meant something to her. I actually made her feel good. Not just in bed, but really good. She met me and thought that maybe if things worked out with us, she could stop using. She could get better. She could have gotten better. Maybe I'm just being an idiot thinking that she could have been right, but she could have had a chance. We could have had a chance.

"Fuck," I whisper softly, my voice hoarse from weeping. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck."

I roll out of bed and head to the closet, moving feverishly. I can't feel like this. I can't fucking feel like this, or I'll go insane and wind up on the news for butchering my mother with a kitchen knife and then stabbing myself through the temple.

Lila's face flashes across my mind, then Annie's, then Lila's again. I stop inside the closet, leaning against the wall. "Damn it," I whisper, tears falling from my face onto the plastic bins that count as a dresser when you have an alcoholic mother. "Fuck."

I sink to my knees, my hands folded like I'm praying, and release a choking sob. It's loud. Loud enough that if my mother were a mother and not a fucking waste, she'd

know her son was weeping with anger and despair and trying his hardest not to jam a needle into his arm just so he can have five minutes of peace.

I think of calling Vivian. She cares about me. She would want to help me. Even if she can't be here to hold me, she could talk to me, help me get centered. She wouldn't want me to be on the needle.

But I don't call her. In the middle of my crisis, I realize somehow that she doesn't really care about me. At the end of the day, she's just another rich schemer in a neighborhood full of rich schemers. She doesn't have a husband to worry about, so she can have fun with the sexy pool boy. She might even like me a little bit, but she's not going to help me when I'm sobbing on the ground trying to convince myself not to shoot heroin.

I need to do this myself. I'm alone. I'm fucking alone.

Just like Lila was alone.

Anger seeps in through my despair. My mom's wasted on the couch in the living room sleeping in a pool of vodka, sweat and piss, but somehow, Lila's parents are even worse. Somehow, the daughter of the tech mogul and the former actress has worse parents than my absentee father and drunk mother.

"I'm going to avenge you, Lila," I promise. "I'm going to bring those fuckers down. I don't know how, but I swear to God, I'll bring them down."

The anger pushes the despair away, and slowly, the shaking stops. I get to my feet and walk away from the closet, stoically refusing to look back at the rig I know waits for me.

I pick up the diary on my desk. I don't bother hiding it. It's not like Mom would care

if she found it. Hell, the only reason I hide my heroin is that I'm afraid she'd steal it and find something more powerful than vodka to take the pain away.

I'll take this to the police tomorrow. I'll give it to Detective Ramirez. She'll read that, and she'll know that the Kensingtons had to have killed Lila. She'll know.

But will she care? She didn't have trouble calling Lila's death an accident. The case was open for what, two days? Then LAPD just washes their hands of her. Oh, mom and dad are rich? Well, we're not touching that one. Too bad for little Lila.

In the back of my head, I hear a voice telling me to calm down and think this through before I do anything rash. What am I going to do anyway? What can I do?

I don't know. That's the answer. I have no idea what I can do.

But I'm going to do something. I'm not just going to let people forget that Lila Kensington was murdered in her own home by the two people who were supposed to love her most in this world.

I go back to bed, but I don't close my eyes. I won't get any more sleep tonight.

I know what I'm going to do. Tomorrow, I'm going to talk to Julian Kensington. We'll see if Mr. Cool is as cool as he thinks he is when he's presented with the evidence of his own evil.

Maybe it's stupid. It probably is. But it'll be worth it to me just to see the fear in that asshole's eyes when he realizes someone knows what he and Clara did.

That thought brings a smile to my face, and a few minutes later, I'm able to sleep.

I've never been in a fight.

That thought hits me out of nowhere as I drive to Autumn Downs the next morning. Somehow, despite stealing cars for a living, breaking into people's homes, stealing, and buying drugs by myself in Huntington Park and Cudahy from fourteen to sixteen, I've never been in a fistfight. I guess I have some luck after all.

But today, I'm going to talk to Julian Kensington and get him to admit what the hell he did. And I might have to fight him. I have no idea how that's going to go. On one hand, I'm bigger than he is. I'm six-foot-one and one hundred eighty pounds, and I'm in good shape even though I never played sports or worked out or anything. I'm also twenty-five years younger than him, so that's got to count in my favor.

On the other hand, I don't know anything about him. For all I know, he could secretly be a black belt or train with ex-Navy SEALs. Or he could have a bodyguard somewhere in the house that I haven't seen yet. For all I know, I'm about to get my ass kicked or even beaten to death. Even if that doesn't happen, the best-case scenario for me is I end up in jail for assault. Detective Ramirez gets a search warrant for my house and slaps a possession charge on me. She digs up my juvenile history and finds the judge who warned me about slipping up and next thing you know, I'm doing ten years in Wasco.

I don't care. Someone needs to stand up for Lila.

I pick up the van at seven. Ahmed isn't there, and the person behind the counter couldn't give two shits that I'm an hour and a half early. If all goes well, I'll still be able to get work done today.

I laugh at myself for that. I'm about to confront a murderer and possibly get myself killed or put away, and I'm worried about losing my job. I think it's time to admit I don't give a shit about that anymore.

I reach the Kensington house, and suddenly it becomes very easy to admit I don't give a shit anymore. I get out of the van and stalk to the house, the diary in my hand. My blood boils, and while I don't consider myself a violent person by any means, I find myself hoping that Julian tries something.

I knock on the door, and the sound is so loud that it causes me to flinch. God, I'm angry.

The door opens and Julian looks at me, a frown on his face. "Hello? Can I help you?"

He's relaxed. God, he's so fucking relaxed. He's standing there without a care in the world, like nothing's wrong, and he didn't kill his own daughter a few days ago.

"You can help Lila," I say.

He frowns. "Excuse me?"

"There's no excuse for you, you piece of shit."

His frown deepens. "You need to leave my property, young man."

I hold up the diary and say, "Really? Are you sure about that? I think we should talk first, Julian."

He pales slightly, and I feel a rush of triumph seeing that. He knows. He knows I have proof of his crimes in my hand.



“Is that Lila’s diary? Where did you get that? Did you break into my house?”

“Damned right I did. Pulled this out of your dead daughter’s bedroom while you and the coke fiend were out partying it up.”

He blinks and takes a step backward. “How dare you trespass on my property.”

“How dare you kill your daughter.”

He flinches and pales further. “You are overstepping your boundaries, young man. Leave my house now, or I’ll call the police.”

“Call them. Tell them about Pacific Oil. Tell them about the money you transferred to accounts in Barbados and St. Kitts. Tell them about how you got rid of Derek when he stopped playing ball.”

He starts to tremble and takes another step backwards. “You are out of line.”

“Fuck you! Admit it! You killed her, you fucking coward!”

“Nate!”

This time it’s my turn to flinch. That was Vivian. What’s she doing here?

“Nathan!” she hisses, grabbing my arm and pulling me off the porch.

“You’d better stay the fuck away from us!” Julian calls. “And give my daughter’s diary back!”

“Fuck you! I’m taking this—”

Before I can finish that sentence, Vivian snatches the diary out of my hands. She stalks to Julian and hands the diary to him. “I’ll take care of this, Julian.”

I’m too stunned to react. I stare at Vivian in shock and see anger in her eyes as she stares at me. Anger? At me?

She grabs my arm again. ”Come on.”

I pull my arm from her grasp. ”No! You just gave him back the only evidence—”

She grabs my arm again, this time digging her nails into my skin. “Come on.”

She pulls me away, and I follow. I don’t know what else to do. Of all the things I thought might happen, Vivian showing up and pulling me away from the house is not one of them.

She leads me to the van and holds out the hand that isn’t cutting grooves into my forearm. “Keys.”

“No,” I say, hating how petulant I sound.

She takes a deep breath and repeats in a voice that’s barely calm. “Give me the fucking keys.”

I stare at her, tears welling in my eyes. She waits a second, then reaches into my pocket and yanks out the keys. Then she drags me around to the passenger side, opens the door and says, “Get in.”

I get in. I hate myself for doing it, but I get in. What the hell just happened?

She gets in the driver’s seat and peels around. We stay silent on the drive down the

street to her house. When she parks, we sit there for a moment before she says, “Can I trust you to walk into my house without acting like a spoiled brat, or do I need to drag you again?”

I don’t answer her. I just push open the door and storm to her front porch. I hear the van door slam and hear Vivian’s heels clicking on the walkway. She brushes past me and opens the door, then pulls me inside.

As soon as the door closes behind me, she whirls around. “What the hell were you thinking?”

My anger flares up, but as soon as she says that, it’s like my brain clicks into gear. I imagine what it must have looked like to Vivian or anyone else walking up and seeing that. An angry teenager shouting at a man who just lost his daughter while waving stolen property in his face and calling him a killer.

Heat climbs my cheeks, and Vivian sighs and plants her hands on her face, massaging her temples. “For God’s sake, Nate.”

Her anger is dissolving now that we’re safe out of public view, and that somehow makes me feel worse. I don’t feel like the man she’s sleeping with anymore. I feel like her little boy, and she just pulled him into the house to have a lecture and a timeout.

I realize just how utterly stupid that thought is, and it only makes me feel worse.

“Have a seat,” she says.

“What?”

“Sit down.”

“Where?”

“I don’t give a shit. Just sit down so I know you’re not going to storm off and act like an asshole.”

I head to the table and sit down. The fact that I’m meekly following her instructions grates on me.

Just a sulking little boy.

She starts making coffee, and I say, “I don’t want any coffee.”

“Well, I do,” she snaps.

She makes the coffee, sighing heavily and shaking her head. She’s wearing a khaki skirt and a casual button-down, and her hair’s pulled back in a ponytail. It’s the first time I’ve seen her wearing normal clothes, and she looks hot as hell.

God, I hate that I still notice how hot she is right now.

She stands impatiently in front of the coffee pot and waits for it to finish. When it’s done, she pours two mugs. They’re garden-variety department store mugs rather than the handcrafted designs Mrs. Winslow has. Weird the things my mind chooses to focus on right now.

“I said I don’t want coffee,” I tell her.

“I don’t give a shit.”

She sets the coffee in front of me and says, “I swear to God, you’d better finish that.” I lower my eyes, and she says, “No. Screw that. You’re man enough to go challenge

Julian Kensington to a duel in the streets, so you can look me in the eye when I talk to you.”

I lift my eyes to hers and see compassion. Anger, sure, but also compassion. I think it would be easier to just see anger.

“What the hell were you thinking?”

I take a deep breath. “I was angry. I just... I wanted...”

“Nate, the police ruled her death an accident.”

“It wasn’t a fucking accident!” I shout.

“Don’t you dare shout at me,” she says, somehow not raising her own voice. “We can talk without going crazy.”

“No! Fuck that!” Tears come to my eyes again, and God, I’m so mad right now. “No one cares! No one cares that she’s dead! They know what happened! I know they know! That diary proved it, and you gave it back to him? And what were you doing there, anyway?”

“I was following you. I saw your van pass my house, and I...” she looks away and reddens slightly. “I thought I’d surprise you. I was going to follow you to your first house and...” she lifts her hand and lets it drop. “Make out with you a bit and then invite you over later. I thought it would be nice to tease you and get you excited for later. Then I saw where you were really headed, and... I guess I didn’t get there fast enough.”

That should make me feel good. That should make me calm down. At the very least, it should make me stop acting like a petulant child.

But I'm too upset to think. All I can feel is angry and humiliated and powerless. So instead of acting like someone with an ounce of intelligence, I say, "You know what? I'm not just a damned sex toy."

She doesn't flinch or gasp like I expect her to. She just sighs and says, "Calm down, Nate."

"No! I'm not going to calm down! Why don't you care? Why does no one—"

"I care, Nate!" she shouts, raising her voice loudly enough that I flinch. "I care that a girl was murdered ten houses down the same goddamned street where I live. I care. But that doesn't mean I go to their front porch, wave the diary that I stole in their faces and shout that they need to 'fess up or else. Speaking of that, or else what? What were you going to do?"

"I was going to go to the police," I mumble.

"The police that ruled the death an accident?"

"Someone needs to—"

"Enough, Nate. It happened. She died. She was probably murdered. Whoever killed her got away with it. It happened. It sucks, but there's nothing you can do about it, and shit like what you pulled today will do absolutely nothing to help."

Annie's face flashes across my mind. Her broken, twisted body, torn apart by some dickweed who just had to drive home drunk off his ass.

"I can't just leave it like that," I whisper hoarsely. "It's not fair."

I stand suddenly and stalk out of the kitchen. I grab the keys to the van off of the table

in the foyer, then leave the house, ignoring Vivian as she calls my name.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Lena read through the key points of Lila Kensington's medical record. Then she read it again. Then she read it another time.

She didn't need to read it more than once. She'd learned years ago to memorize key points on the first read-through. She read it anyway, because while she didn't need to absorb any more information, hearing it repeated in her head solidified it and helped her understand what she wanted to do next.

She hadn't gotten that far yet.

"I'm heading out, boss. Can I convince you to go home and sleep in a bed, or would you like me to bring you a cot from one of the cells?"

Lena smiled at Harris. "Why don't you lie down on the floor, and I'll rest my head on your chest?"

"That's funny. Seriously, boss, you're starting to obsess."

"What reason would the medical examiner have to lie about Lila Kensington's cause of death?"

Harris shook his head. "No. You're not pulling me down this rabbit hole. Go home, go to sleep, let it go."

"You know I can't do that, Damien."

Harris sighed and rubbed his head. He looked wistfully at the exit.



“Go,” Lena said. “It’s all right.”

“Fuck you,” he replied, walking into her office and shutting the door. He grabbed the chair on the other side of her desk and pulled it around next to hers, then plopped down. “What are we looking at?”

“Lila Kensington’s medical record. Or rather, the notes I took when I read through it. What do you see here?”

Harris skimmed the page. ”BMI forty-fifth percentile. Mild eczema on the upper arms. Increased opioid tolerance due to overuse of prescription-strength oxycodone. So she was a drug user in the early stages of addiction.”

“Yes, but look at the BMI again. Forty-fifth percentile.”

“Okay? Why does that matter?”

“Because the death was ruled an accident due to complications from bulimia nervosa. She ate a ton of food, threw it all up, then walked outside, passed out due to a severe drop in blood pressure, then fell and hit her head.”

“Bulimic people can present a healthy BMI.”

“Not while also presenting normal heart function and cholesterol and glucose levels within acceptable ranges.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying the ME lied.”

“Maybe he didn’t want to embarrass the family. Drug overdose carries stigma, even

in the day and age of ‘all my poor choices are a disease, and I shouldn’t be held responsible.’”

“Exactly.”

Harris sighed and rubbed his temples again. “I hate when you do this, Lena. What are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying that the ME lied.”

Harris lifted his eyes to the ceiling as though silently begging God to save him from this annoying woman. “And your point?”

“My point is it raises questions. Why did the ME lie?”

“And my point is that she didn’t want to embarrass the Kensington. Julian’s a star child right now. Scimitar Analytics is the fastest-growing tech firm in the nation and Julian’s practically a shoo-in for city council and a definite shoo-in for mayor in two years if he makes it. Embarrassing a family like that carries consequences, and Dr. Basler probably didn’t want the hassle.”

“Exactly. And one wonders what led Basler to that conclusion.”

“You mean who, and the answer is Julian Kensington. You also mean, ‘Did Julian pressure Basler to that conclusion because he didn’t want us looking too hard at him and his wife for murder?’ The answer is probably yes. The answer is also, we lose our badges immediately if we make this something the Chief has to deal with.”

“A kid died, Damien.”

“Kids die every day, Lena. Do we throw our careers away over this one, or do we

stay and help the ones we can?”

Lena looked back at the screen and tapped her desk. Harris was being an asshole, but he did have a point. If she chased this, she could end up getting both of them fired, and if both of them were fired, then it was a certainty that a lot of criminals were going to get away with a lot of shit before the department found someone to replace them.

But if she didn’t chase this, then Lena Kensington’s murderer would be the Mayor of Los Angeles in two years.

“That kid, Nathan, the one who came back to talk to me.”

“Yeah, I remember him. That was only yesterday.”

“He didn’t take kindly to me probing him.”

“Do you think he’s involved somehow?”

“I did, but I don’t think so anymore. That’s not the point, though. The point is he interpreted my questioning as classism.”

“Classism?”

“Yes. Discrimination against people of a certain socioeconomic—”

”I know what classism is. I mean, really? That’s how he took it?”

“I’m sure he has his reasons. The real point is that he was convinced I was coming after him because it was easier to blame the poor pool boy than the rich tech mogul. The shitty part is that he’s right.”

“The hell he is. Just because he can’t handle a tough conversation doesn’t mean you’re an asshole for doing your job.”

“We are though, if you think about it.”

“How so?”

Lena pointed at the screen. “The ME lied. Pushed to or not, he let the world believe that Lila Kensington’s death was an accident because that was easier than admitting the possibility that someone rich and powerful could have committed that crime. Letting such a person get away with it was easier than risking that person’s anger toward you.”

“So cry me a river, build me a bridge and deal with it. The world’s not perfect. I gave up trying to make it that way twenty years ago.”

“Nathan Harlow hasn’t.”

“Nathan Harlow’s a kid.”

“He’s still right.”

Harris sighed and slumped. “So what do you want to do?”

“I want to care.”

Harris stared blankly at her. “You want to care?”

“Someone has to.”

“The kid say that to?”

“He did.”

“You sure you’re not just hot for the sexy pool boy?”

Lena chuckled. “That’s a fun thought, but no. I like my men old and bitter.”

“He seemed pretty bitter.”

“He also seemed young enough to order a happy meal.”

“Anyone can order a happy meal.”

Lena rolled her eyes. “Well, I’ll tell you what. As challenging as it is, I’ll keep my shirt buttoned at least until we discover what really happened to Lila Kensington.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“You’ll understand when you’re older.”

He rolled his eyes. “So what do you want to do?”

“I want to have a conversation with Dr. Basler.”

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Dr. Jordan Basler was ordinarily one of the most beautiful women Lena had ever seen. She had long brown hair with a generous helping of natural blonde highlights, striking green eyes and a bone structure that would have won her Miss Universe ten years in a row if she hadn’t decided to go to Johns Hopkins instead.

But right now, she was biting her lip, scratching her arm and fidgeting like a meth

head ten hours removed from his last hit.

“Look, it’s late,” she told the detectives. “I was just about to go home for the evening.”

“Lila Kensington isn’t going home.”

Since impatience didn’t work, Dr. Basler tried taking offense instead. “Oh, I’m sorry. I’d forgotten that sixteen years of medical education and nine years of experience wasn’t enough to qualify me. I must have screwed up my autopsy. I’ll be happy to dig her up and do another one. Oh wait, that’s right. She was cremated. Guess I can’t do that.”

Lena was in no mood for the bullshit. “Jordan, you will be honest with me now, or I will formally seek charges against you for falsifying evidence. How sure are you that I’ll lose that case?”

Jordan looked from Lena’s stony eyes to Harris’s equally cold gaze. She swallowed painfully, then folded her hands on the table and twiddled her thumbs.

“You can start talking now,” Harris offered helpfully.

Jordan slumped. She lifted her hands and let them fall, then said, “He’s Julian Kensington. What am I supposed to do, say no?”

“I have to believe that someone with sixteen years of medical education and nine years of experience is smart enough to know the answer to that question,” Lena replied. “So I’ll skip to my next one. What did he tell you to do?”

“He didn’t tell me to do anything. He pulled me aside when I gave him my report and said that Clara was having a really hard time with everything. He said that if she

found out that Lila was still using, it would devastate her. He really hoped that I was about to tell him that Lila died from her disorder and not from a habit that Clara had tried so hard to help her get rid of.”

“Or from someone drowning her.”

Jordan paled. “He didn’t say that.”

“Did he have to?”

Jordan sighed and looked away from the officers. Her lips trembled. She took a deep breath and folded her hands in front of her. “I... ” she hung her head, “the contusion on the back of Lila’s head appeared to be... it’s conceivable that it wasn’t an accidental fall.”

“Wonderful. Thank you. Harris?”

The two of them left Dr. Basler to consider the implications of her actions. When they were back in her car, Harris asked, “You want to go talk to the Kensingtons now?”

She shook her head. “Not yet. We go talk to them now, we’ll just be giving the slippery little asshole a warning so he can squirm underground somewhere and spend the rest of his days hiding in a beach house in Thailand. We’re going to keep digging until we find enough rope to hang him. Then we’ll spring the trap.”

He grinned. “Just like the good old days.”

“If you say so.”

Still, when she checked the rearview mirror before backing out of her parking space,

she saw that she wore the same grin as Harris.



*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

I finish my work in record time. Twelve houses in eight hours. It's not even five o'clock by the time I tell Mrs. Garrity I hope to be of service to her again soon and get in the van to head home. I make it about a mile before I realize I'm not heading home.

I'm not heading to Vivian's either. I'm pretty sure I fucked that up for good. Aside from the fact that Vivian wants me to just deal with the fact that Lila's killers are going to get away with it, the way she treated me made it clear that however much she might like me in bed, she still sees me as a child. The way I reacted to the way she treated me made it clear that I am one.

So yeah, that's probably over. Here's to you, Mrs. Robinson, and thanks for the memories.

Instead, I go to Mrs. Winslow's house. I have no idea why. I don't even like her. She acted like a kindly old grandmother, then dropped bombshells like a KGB agent.

But those bombshells put me on the path that helped me discover who killed Lila Kensington. I didn't like feeling like she was manipulating me, but she was manipulating me closer to finding justice.

I'm probably just rationalizing after the fact. I'm probably just here because I need someone to talk to, and with Vivian no longer an option and Marco being about as trustworthy as a three-dollar bill, there's no one else. Worst-case scenario, I end up even more part of the neighborhood's gossip than before, but that's something I can deal with. I don't think there's anything I care less about than the opinions of the people of Autumn Downs.

Anyway, I'm here now. If I just sit in front of her house for ten minutes, then drive away, I'll look even more like a creep.

I get out of the car and head to her porch. I knock, and as usual, part of me hopes she won't answer.

As usual, my hopes matter jack-all. She answers almost immediately, and smiles at me with a mixture of tenderness and cunning that I think I'm going to start calling the Autumn Downs Grin.

"Nate! What a pleasant surprise! What brings you here?"

I realize that I have no idea what I'm going to say to her. Hi, Mrs. Winslow, I almost assaulted a neighbor of yours, and the neighbor I've been screwing until my hip blows out had to pull me away. Can we talk?

Fortunately, what ends up leaving my mouth is a little more coherent. "I think I know what happened to Lila."

Mrs. Winslow doesn't look the least bit surprised to hear that. "You'd better come in," she says. "I'll make some coffee."

She leads me inside, and I look around at all the decorations. I focus particularly on the pictures. There are pictures of dogs, pictures of cats, pictures of goldfish. There are images of breathtaking mountain vistas, peaceful ocean views, panoramas of snow-capped forests and vast canyons.

But there aren't any pictures of people. No husband, no children, no grandchildren. No nieces or nephews or kindergarten classes. Mrs. Winslow seems to have been a hermit her whole life.

“I’m going to make yours with cream and sugar this time. I know you usually take it black, but I think you need some balance today.”

Balance. That’s an odd thing to say about coffee. She said something last time too that I thought was odd. What was it? Something about being manly.

“Thank you, Mrs. Winslow,” I remember to say after a moment.

“Of course, dear. Have a seat in the kitchen.”

I sit on a chair that’s upholstered almost as much as the couch, and a moment later, she hands me a steaming cup of coffee with a generous helping of cream and a less generous but still noticeable helping of sugar.

She’s right. This is the perfect cup of coffee for me right now. “Thank you, Mrs. Winslow. This is delicious.”

“Edith.”

“What?”

“Call me Edith. You’ve come to visit me again, and you’re asking for my help. That must mean we’re friends now.”

I lift my gaze to meet hers. She smiles sweetly at me, but her eyes are hard as diamonds. That’s another peculiarity of the lovely folk of Autumn Downs. “Yeah,” I say. “Sure. Thank you, Edith.”

“Of course, dear. Now. You say you know what happened to Lila Kensington. What do you know?”

“Her father killed her. Julian.”

Edith lifted an eyebrow. “Not her mother?”

I shake my head. “I don’t think so. She’s coked out of her mind half the time. I don’t think she’s aware of what’s going on around her anymore.”

“Oh. Oh, dear. I mean, I knew she was addled by drugs, but I didn’t suspect it had gone so far.”

“Yeah, well, believe it.” I take another sip of my coffee, then say, “I guess she’s probably involved. She at least helped him cover it up. Hell, she might even have—”

“Watch your language, dear.”

“Right. Sorry. I was saying she might have been the one to do the deed, but Julian was the one who organized it.”

“You’re sure of this?”

I nod and sip more coffee. “I read Lila’s diary.”

“You read Lila’s diary? How?”

“I broke in.”

Edith’s eyes widen in shock. “You what?”

“Last night. Julian and Clara went out to party or something, so I broke in while they were gone and read Lila’s diary. It’s all there.”

“What’s all there? She knew they were going to kill her?”

“No, but she knew all about Clara’s drug use, and she knew a lot of criminal activities that Julian was involved in. I’m talking seriously bad stuff. Like organized crime stuff. Extortion, racketeering, embezzlement, political deals and at least one case where someone was ‘gotten rid of.’”

“Oh, my stars.”

“Yeah, I know. He’s basically the Al Capone of Autumn Downs.”

“Oh, my word.” Edith leans back in her chair and stares out the window, eyes wide with shock.

It occurs to me that I’ve just unloaded a lot of heavy stuff on a seventy-two-year-old woman. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Winslow. You don’t need to hear all of this.”

“Edith,” she reminds me, “and I knew most of what you just said, or at least suspected it. I’m just surprised that Lila knew. It makes a lot of sense now.”

“Yeah.” I sip the rest of my coffee. “I just hate that no one’s doing anything about it.”

“Have you told the police?”

“I told them that the Kensingtons killed Lila. I haven’t told them about the diary yet.”

“You should.”

I scoff. “Why? So they can have me arrested for breaking and entering?”

She gives me a gentle but stern smile. “I don’t mean to be cold, dear, but when you

consider what happened to Lila, a little time for burglary is a small price to pay.”

Except it wouldn't be small time for me. With my criminal history, I'd be looking at the maximum sentence of six years. Still, Lila got the death sentence, so Edith has a point.

But... “It's not that simple. The cops had evidence to at least look into the parents, and they ruled the death an accident in two days. The ink was barely dry on the coroner's report, and they swept it under the rug. When I told Detective Ramirez that I had caught Clara doing drugs, she didn't even care. She just wanted to know why I was back at the house. She thought I was selling drugs to Clara and Lila.”

“I see.”

“Yeah. They really want to stay off of Julian's bad side.”

“Do you have the diary still?”

I shook my head. “No, she...” I catch myself before I tell on Vivian. When I lift my eyes to Edith, she has that hard look in them again. I don't know if Vivian could get in trouble for anything she did, but I know that people talk in this neighborhood, and I don't want to make anything harder for her than I already have.

I feel a pang of guilt for my earlier behavior. Vivian was only trying to protect me. I need to go apologize to her.

I finish with, “He took it back.”

“Julian? How did he take it back?”

I redden. “I... I confronted him.” Edith sighed and looked down at her coffee. “I

know, I know. I fucked up.”

“Language.”

“Sorry. I messed up. I was just angry, and no one was doing anything. I figured that someone should let them know they hadn’t gotten away with it.”

“But they have so far. And allowing your emotions to control you only increased the chances that they’ll still get away with it.”

Her correction is delivered far more gently than Vivian’s, but it cuts far deeper. I lower my head and feel tears come to my eyes again.

Edith stands and takes the empty coffee mug. “Tears don’t help. Save them for later.”

The gentleness is gone from her voice. I lift my head and see her eyes boring into mine. If anyone looked in through the window, they would probably wonder why a six-foot-one nineteen-year-old boy was shrinking under the glare of a seventy-two-year-old woman who might be five feet tall in heels, but that’s exactly what I do.

“If you want to punish someone,” she says, “You have to be smart, and you have to be patient. So no more confronting Julian. No more robbing their home. No more lurking and trying to catch Clara doing something that the wider world couldn’t care less about. Talk to the police and tell them what you know. I agree that they would rather ignore crimes committed by the wealthy, but eventually, the headache of hiding things becomes too much for them to continue. Handle this the right way and accept that it takes more time than the wrong way.” She straightens. “The taste of victory will be all the sweeter for it.”

She takes the mugs to the kitchen and leaves me there to wonder who the hell I just talked to.

When she returns, she's the sweet, grandmotherly lady I remember. We talk about things that have nothing to do with the Kensington. She tells me about vacations she's taken earlier in life and asks me about school. I relax a little and leave feeling a bit better than I do when I arrive.

But the look in her eyes from before—that cold, hard stare—remains in my mind long after I leave.



## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

I consider Edith's words about punishing the wrong people. It occurs to me that my behavior earlier with Vivian was punishing her for something that isn't her fault.

And it occurs to me that I have to apologize to her. Regardless of our personal relationship, what I did was rude. She didn't deserve that.

So, when I leave Edith's house, I head to Vivian's.

I hesitate a moment on the porch. A part of me really wants to be here. Another part of me really wishes I had never come here the first time. Most of me just wishes this was all over, and I was in class at CSULB well on my way to forgetting Autumn Downs and everyone who lives here.

But I have to do this. I can't let the argument earlier be Vivian's last memory of me or mine of her.

So, I lift my hand, but before I can knock, the door opens. Vivian is wearing a nightgown, the silk one she wears the other day. Her hair is down, and she's taken off her makeup. She's still beautiful, but she looks her age for the first time since I've seen her, and it affects me strangely.

Then she smiles, and I stop caring about that. "You gonna come in, or just stand there with your hand raised like a dummy?"

I follow her inside, and she leads me to the table. "Sit. I'll make you some tea."

Not wine, I notice. Not that I feel like drinking right now.

She starts the water boiling and asks, “So did you come to apologize for being a complete asshole earlier?”

I lower my eyes and nod.

“Words, sweetie.”

The endearment cuts me, mostly because the tone she uses is not unlike my mother’s when I was younger, before Annie died.

“I’m sorry for being a complete asshole earlier.”

“And I forgive you.” She smiles at me. “See how easy it is when you take a moment to think instead of just following your emotions everywhere they take you?”

I nod again. She begins to speak, but I don’t want to hear her call me sweetie again, so I say, “Yes.”

She nods, then turns back to the tea. I sit in silence while she finishes it. I don’t know what to say. I know I should say something, but I can’t figure out what.

“Come on,” she says. “Let’s go sit in the living room.”

I follow her and start to sit on the chair, but when she sits on the couch, she pats the cushion next to her. I don’t really feel like sex right now, but my body has other ideas. Yet another reminder that I’m only nineteen years old. What a blow to my ego this day has been.

I sit next to her, but instead of kissing me like I expect her to do, she pulls my head to her chest and starts stroking my hair. It’s the most comforting thing anyone could possibly do, but once more, it feels motherly, not the act of a lover. I don’t know why

that bothers me so much.

“You want to tell me what’s going on?” she asks gently.

I don’t want to tell her anything. I don’t want to encourage her to keep petting me like I’m her little boy. I know that’s petty of me, but there it is.

I can’t help myself, though. I might not like this, but it appears that even I don’t care what I would like right now.

”My sister died in a hit-and-run when I was ten years old.”

She pauses for an instant, and I can tell she wasn’t expecting this. Then she continues to stroke my hair. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. Me too.” I chuckled bitterly. “They never caught the guy. They figured out the model of car, though. A Mercedes-Maybach S600. Brand new. A V12 model.”

“Ah. That’s why you hate rich people.”

I consider correcting her, but she’s right. I do hate rich people. I fucking hate them. They can get away with murder, and no one gives a shit. Meanwhile, a poor kid with an absentee father and an alcoholic mother steals a few cars from people who can afford to replace them, and he gets told he’s one more step away from a life in and out of prison.

“Yes.”

We stay silent for a while, and though I hate to admit it, the feel of her hand running softly through my hair is starting to relax me. When I’m relaxed, I start talking more.

“That’s why I want justice for Lila. I want someone to care that she was murdered. I want it to matter that those rich assholes got away with killing her. I know she was rich too, but...”

“But she’s not alive to throw her wealth around, and Julian and Clara are.”

“Exactly. It’s bullshit.”

She’s silent for a moment. Maybe she’s trying to think if she should ask the next question or not.

“Did you like her?”

Now, it’s my turn to think about how to answer it. I consider lying, but I doubt Vivian is jealous. In a moment of clarity, I realize that I’m probably not the first young lover she’s had, and I won’t be the last. A slightly more bitter part of my brain wonders if that habit is what led to her divorce. She claims that he cheated on her, but who knows if anything anyone here says is the truth.

Well, I’ll tell the truth.

“Yeah. At least, I think I would have. I only got to talk to her for a few minutes, but she seemed... I don’t know. Normal. Maybe that’s not the right word. Normal here means something different.”

“She seemed like you.”

“Yes.”

I feel tense again, so I wait for Vivian’s caresses to soothe me once more before I continue. “She was goofy and quirky and... a little lonely. She hated her parents, too.

I can relate to all of that.”

“Why do you hate your parents?”

“Because they hate me.”

She pauses again. Lot of stunners for Vivian Chase today. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. Not anymore, anyway. As far as I’m concerned, they can go screw themselves.”

“I don’t blame you for feeling that way.”

She doesn’t ask to know why I think they hate me, but I tell her anyway. “Dad left when I was twelve, two years after Annie died.”

“That’s your sister?”

“Yeah. I remember I was crying and begging him to stay, and he looked at me like... like I was something you scrape off the bottom of your shoe.”

“Poor baby.”

That rubs me in all the wrong ways. I sit up, and I’m grateful when her hand falls, and she doesn’t try to put it back on my head. “I hate that I cried. I hate that I begged that asshole to stay. That piece of shit didn’t deserve to know that his son was going to miss him. He doesn’t deserve to look back and feel like he was worth missing.”

She smiles sadly. “I hate to say it, but he probably doesn’t look back at all.”

I know that, obviously, but hearing it said out loud still hurts. I look away from

Vivian and stare at the blank tv. “Mom’s an alcoholic. I mean a constant one. She started drinking before Dad left. I can’t remember the last time I saw her sober. We live off of government assistance and the money I can bring in.”

“That’s horrible.”

“You don’t even know,” I say, a little angrily. I take a breath to calm myself, and when she puts her hand on the back of my neck and starts massaging me, I don’t stop her. “She told me when I was fourteen that she wished I was the one who died.”

That stuns Vivian again. She gasps and says, “Oh my God. Oh, Nate. I’m so sorry.”

I shrug. “What can you do? Parents have favorites, and then they have the kids they wish were dead.”

I wait for Vivian to tell me that my parents didn’t grieve properly and that if my mother got sober, she’d stop thinking the way she does. I’ve heard that from people before. It’s just another excuse, and I’ll dismantle it when she says it.

She doesn’t say it, and after a moment, I say. “That’s why I want justice for Lila.”

“To get back at your parents by punishing hers?”

“No.” I stop a moment.

Up until now, I thought that was exactly what I wanted. Now that I think about it, though, my motives are different.

“I want justice for Annie. I want justice for the damage her death did to our family. I want the rich asshole who hit her to be punished for destroying four people, then just driving off like it didn’t matter. But I’ll never get it. So I guess I feel like if I can get

justice for Lila, I'll get justice for her too. I don't know. It's probably just what I tell myself so I can get through the day."

"Well, the main thing is that you're getting through the day. It's not easy, but you're doing it. You're making something out of your life, and you're not falling into something that could get you hurt or killed. You're surviving. That makes you strong."

The rush of guilt that hits me when she says that drives away all the resentment I feel about being treated like a child. I hang my head and say, "No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

"No, I'm not. I shot heroin the night before Lila died."

Vivian's hand stops moving again. When she moves it again, it's only to take it away completely. My heart sinks to my feet, and I say, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to unload all of this on you. I just wanted to apologize for earlier. I'll stay away from the Kensington from now on. I did my best, but I'm only making things worse. I'll stay away from... I mean, you don't have to..."

She cups my face in hers and turns me so our eyes meet. "Hush. Come to bed."

She doesn't say it like she wants me. She says it like she knows I feel bad, and she's trying to comfort me. It just makes me feel more like a kid being comforted by his mother. I know that's stupid because she's about to do something very unmotherly to me, but it still feels like she's just soothing a crying child.

I want to say no. I want to leave. I want to show myself that I can handle this on my own, and I don't need what she's offering.

But I don't. Instead, I follow her to her bedroom, and when she turns to me and drops her nightgown, I take what she has to offer desperately and without hesitation.



## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

I don't have any nightmares last night. I don't know if that's a good thing. Part of me feels like I just replaced one drug for another drug. On the surface, it seems like Vivian is a far better drug than heroin, but I'm not so sure anymore.

I'm not so sure any drug is good. All I'm doing is avoiding facing my grief. Whether it's sex with Vivian, a needle in my arm, or an anger-fueled rant at Julian Kensington, I'm just hiding from the real struggle.

I think I'll go to Venice today. Today's my day off, so I only have the four clients I missed from the other day when I went to the cops about Clara's drug use. I'll finish those, then I'll return the van early and take the bus down to Venice. It's going to be crowded as hell, but that's all right. I wouldn't mind getting lost in a crowd today. It's better than going home where Mom will just have me running to the Circle K for groceries and then to Leo's for alcohol. It's a hell of a lot better than staying in Autumn Downs where I'll either end up lurking around the Kensingtons' place until I get mad enough to confront them or heading to Vivian's to use sex to drown my emotions.

I finish just after eleven, and I breathe a sigh of relief when I leave the neighborhood. The security guard is different today, and he doesn't even look up from his cell phone when I leave. I like him.

I drop the van off, and head to the bus station. It'll take me about an hour to get to Venice. I figure probably another hour of waiting for food before I can head to the ocean and unwind. The heatwave has calmed considerably, but it's still ninety-six degrees here, and it'll probably be close to ninety at the beach, figure maybe eighty with the breeze. The point is it will still be busy as hell.

“Nate! Hey!”

I hear the voice, and at first I think I’m just hearing things. No way he’s actually here right now. I swear, the most irritating parts of my life are clinging to me like gum to the bottom of a sneaker.

“Nate! I know you can hear me asshole!”

Nope. That’s really him.

I sigh, then force a smile as I look up. That smile fades immediately when I see the dark frown on Marco’s face. He’s sitting in his truck at the bus stop glaring at me. The other waiting passengers are ignoring him with the almost instinctive blindness of long-term Metro riders.

I remember the hard look he wore the first day I ran into him in Autumn Downs. I remember how much it reminded me of Arturo’s expression, the one that made me certain that he had earned his teardrop tattoos.

“Everything okay, Marco?”

“No. Get in the fucking truck.”

I look around uneasily, half-expecting to see a bunch of equally hard-faced gangsters staring at me. “There a problem with talking here?”

“You want to pay my ticket when LAPD pulls me over for blocking the bus stop? Get in the truck.”

I consider my options. None of them are good. If I try to leave, then Marco will just find me at Autumn Downs. If I go with him...

Well, what? What did I do to him anyway? He's probably just offering me a job. I'll have to figure out how to tell him no, but I can tell him the police are watching me because of Lila's murder. It's better if I lay low for a while.

"Do I have to get out and drag you? Get in the truck, pendejo."

I doubt that Marco could drag me considering I outweigh him by forty pounds, but I also don't want to get into a fight with him, so I get in the truck. He pulls away and accelerates rapidly to the speed of traffic, but thankfully doesn't weave recklessly.

"Everything okay?" I ask again.

"No. But we're going to talk about it over lunch, okay? I'm pissed right now, and if I talk while I'm pissed, I'm just going to end up yelling at you."

My eyes widen. I've never heard of Marco even attempting to control his emotions. I don't want to risk ruining that, so I don't say anything.

He drives back toward the L.A. Flats, the high-class area near the similarly named neighborhood of Beverly Hills where Autumn Downs is located. I frown and ask, "Are you taking me back to Autumn Downs?"

"No, stupid. We're getting lunch."

"In the Flats?"

"They sell tacos there too."

I decide it's better if I don't say anything else, so I wait until he pulls into the parking lot of a very nice-looking Mexican restaurant that looks like the kind of place the residents of Autumn Downs might frequent.

“Um... are you sure we’re dressed right for this place?”

He gives me a look that’s full of so much contempt that I actually flinch. That’s the only response I get from him. He gets out of the car and heads inside.

I follow after a few seconds and once more fall silent until we have our food, and we’re sitting at a table on the restaurant’s patio.

Marco efficiently works his way through a plate of four tacos al pastor. I am no longer even remotely hungry, but I don’t want to put Marco in an even worse mood, so I finish the two carne asada tacos I have on my plate and stay silent.

When Marco finishes his last bite, he takes a long sip of water, then looks me right in the eyes. “You’re a fucking idiot, bro.”

I nod. “So I’ve heard.”

“Seriously. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

I’m trying to keep cool, but there’s only so much I can take, even from Marco. “It might help if you told me what exactly has you so pissy,” I fire back.

“I just came from Vivian’s place.”

I flinch again. My frustration flares into suspicion and anger. “Doing what?”

He frowns. “Mowing her fucking lawn, dipshit.”

I feel heat climb into my cheeks. “Okay. I was just asking.”

“Yeah, believe it or not, I’m actually not an asshole.”

The heat migrates to my neck. “Okay. I’m sorry.”

“Seriously, man.” He’s calmer now, more incredulous than angry. “What the hell is going on with you? It’s like you never grew up.”

I frown. “Like I never grew up?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I forgot that I must be the immature one. After all, I joke about hot girls and talk like I came from the hood. I must be a little man-child who never grew out of boosting cars. Forget the fact that I have a good job and my own apartment. Forget that unlike you, I haven’t touched drugs in three years.”

“You told me that you took that job to sleep with married women and steal from the elderly.”

“I was joking, pendejo. I thought that was obvious. Why the hell when I have a good job and a place of my own would I throw all that away over someone’s diamond earrings? And don’t give me shit about sleeping around, either. I talked to Vivian, remember? She didn’t say anything, but I’m not stupid. Women don’t blush like that talking about their platonic friends.”

I glare at him. “Screw you.”

”No, screw you. My family life was messed up too, bro. My dad beat on me pretty much constantly. He beat on my mom too, and my mom blamed me for it. My older brother’s doing twenty-to-life for killing some dude in front of his kids, and my sister’s in and out of rehab. Life sucks for everyone, not just you.”

I want to stay angry, but I can’t. The truth of what he says hits me hard. It’s like he poured ice water on my head, and I can think clearly after being drunk all night.

“I’m sorry,” I say, and this time I mean it.

He must be able to tell that I mean it because he sighs and says in a much less angry tone, “It’s all right, bro. It’s just... dude, I care about you. I know we haven’t talked in a while. I figured after you were caught, you were leaving the life behind, and you didn’t want to talk to anyone still inside, and I supported that. Then I ran into you, and you had a job, and you looked good, like healthy. Like you weren’t using anymore. Then you told me you were going to college and stuff. Like, that’s awesome, bro. That’s really good.”

I feel a lump form in my throat. This whole time, I thought Marco was trying to pull me under again. Instead, the truth is almost the opposite. He got his shit together—really got it together. And I’m the one stuck under the past.

“I just...” he sighed. “Look, I don’t know how to be all motivational and shit, but I feel like you’re letting this thing with the Kensington girl ruin your chance at a future. Honestly, I think it’s all messing with you. Even Vivian, like... I’m not saying she’s a bad person. I think she’s pretty cool, but man, there’s nothing there for you. I get that she’s hot, but she’s... I don’t know what I’m saying. I just think you need to get out of all this crap and focus on yourself. Just clean the pools, keep your head down, keep your business to yourself, stay out of their business, get your money, and go to school. But all this shit about going to the Kensingtons’ house to threaten them?” He shakes his head. “Man, you can’t afford that. You get caught littering, you’re in the system for life. You can’t be messing with this shit.”

I know he’s right, but it’s not that easy. I get the part about Vivian. Honestly, I’m half-ready to put an end to that too. I think she probably feels the same way, especially after yesterday.

But I just can’t just look away and pretend that Lila wasn’t murdered. I can’t throw my hands in the air and say, “Oh well. I guess she’s dead now.”

“I can’t just...” I sigh. “She was murdered, Marco.”

“So what?” I stare at him in shock, and he shrugs and says, “Seriously. So what? Like five kids got killed in a nightclub last week in New York. You want to go find the people who shot them and kick their asses?”

“No, but... this is different.”

“Why? Was she your girlfriend or something?”

I shrug. “Well, she could have been.”

“Bro, you’re tripping. Look at me. You clean their pools. That’s what you do. The best you’d have gotten from her was a quick screw in her bedroom while her parents weren’t home.”

“It’s not about that!”

“It should be. She’s not your girlfriend. She’s not your sister, or your cousin, or your best friend, or your wife. There was nothing for you there.”

“But in her diary—”

“I don’t give a shit about her diary! Grow up! You think you’re the only cute boy she wrote about? Like you two were star-crossed souls and your lives were ruined by the cruel ogre of the mountains or some shit? This is what I mean when I say grow up. That shit was going on long before you showed up, and when you finally come to your senses and leave, that shit—all of it—is going to keep going on long after everyone, including Vivian, forgets who the fuck you are.”

I don’t answer. There’s nothing to say. He’s right, but I don’t care that he’s right. No,

I care. I know that I'm probably getting myself into trouble that'll hurt me for the rest of my life.

But...

"I can't just let it go, man. That's what happened to Annie. People just let it go. My sister died, and whoever killed her is out there living his best life."

"You don't know that. For all you know, he killed himself nine years ago because he couldn't live with the guilt. But I get your point." He sighs. "Look, go to the cops, man. I know that's weird coming from the guy who's supposed to be a thief, but go to them. It's their job. Let them handle it."

"But they're not handling it."

"So now you're a cop too? You don't know that they're not handling it."

"They didn't handle Annie."

Tears are welling in my eyes now, but I can't stop them. Marco looks at me with compassion and says quietly, "You don't know that either."

I look away from him and angrily wipe tears from my eyes. "Screw you."

"Shit happens, bro. It sucks. I get it. But shit happens. Sometimes people get hit by cars, and the cops do everything they can, but they don't find the guy. I'm not saying for sure that's what happened, but maybe it is. But you going to their house, stealing their daughter's property? That's not going to help anyone."

I take a deep breath and release it glumly. "I know. I just fucking hate it."



“Me too. But...” he lifts his hands and lets them drop.

We sit in silence for a long moment. It ends when Marco smiles and says. “Come on. I’ll drop you off at Venice.”

“Venice?”

“Yeah. That’s where you’re headed, right?” His smile disappears. “You’re going to leave it alone. Understand?”

I nod. “I understand.”

I hope that will be the last lie I ever tell him.

“Good. Wipe your eyes before you get in the truck, I don’t need you crying all over my leather seats.”

I chuckle and say, “Screw you,” affectionately this time.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Lena stepped back and reviewed the timeline she'd put together. She'd dug back seven months before Lila's death and come up with an idea of Julian's activities during the time period.

As nearly as she could tell, he'd approached Barry Feingold about investing in Scimitar around December. By February, Barry was into Scimitar for something like five or six hundred million. It was after this point that things began to look fishy.

Feingold's firm, Arcturus Investments, had been implicated in a rather shocking number of fraud investigations. None of them exceptionally high dollar amounts—relative to the world of corporate finance, anyway—which was why there was no news coverage, but a shocking amount of medium dollar transactions.

Four of those investigations involved Scimitar. Most tellingly, the second most recent involved a firm called Breakaway Biotech. Breakaway Biotech's founder, Derek Hill, had resisted three attempts at a hostile takeover by Scimitar. Then, just six weeks ago, at the beginning of May, Derek Hill had been found dead in his garage of an apparent suicide. Two weeks after that, Scimitar bought the company for forty percent under market value.

So Julian Kensington was a piece of shit. That wasn't news, but why would he have felt a need to kill Lila? Did she know something and was about to go to the authorities with it? Or worse, the news?

That was the proof she needed. She needed to connect Lila, or at least Lila's death, with Julian's illegal activities with Arcturus and Scimitar.

And that brought her to the morning of Lila's death. The Kensington said they had a pool party at Barry Feingold's house, and Feingold confirmed that. Lena remembered thinking it was odd to have people show up at nine in the morning for a beach party, but she bought the line that it was hot and they wanted to take advantage.

She wasn't sure she bought it anymore.

The door opened, and Harris walked in. "Coffee and donuts, not necessarily in that order," he crooned. "I have a caramel latte for me and a black coffee for Lena's dark and bitter soul. I have a maple bar for me, and an apple fritter for Lena's old and bitter soul."

"You said bitter already."

"So right, I said it twice."

"That doesn't rhyme."

"Who said I was rhyming? You gonna eat it, or should I try to feed it to one of the K9s?"

She took the apple fritter and bit a sizable chunk out of the front. "Harris? How many people were in the photos Barry Feingold showed us of his beach party the day Lila Kensington died?"

Harris blinked and swallowed the bite of maple bar he was chewing. "Um... I don't know. Four, I think?"

"Barry, his wife and the Kensingtons?"

"I don't know if she's his wife, but Barry, the much younger woman whose love he

has probably paid for dearly and the Kensingtons.”

“No one else?”

“Not that I can remember. You want to see the pictures?”

“I do. Actually, I want you to take them with us. We’re going to talk to Barry Feingold.”

“You think he has something to do with this?”

“No, I just like wasting my time.”

“All right. Shesh. No need to get snippy.”

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Arcturus Investments had an office in downtown that took up twenty-six floors of the 777 Tower in the Financial District. Barry’s office was, of course, on the highest of those twenty-six floors, the building’s thirtieth.

As Lena expected, building security, Arcturus reception and Barry’s own secretary tried damned hard to stall the officers, but eventually, Lena found herself in an opulently decorated office with a beautiful view of downtown.

Barry greeted them with the slightly irritated smile that wealthy business owners always wore when dealing with the law. “I wish you guys had made an appointment,” he said as he shook their hands. “I don’t really have a lot of time.”

“You’ll make the time,” Harris said easily.

Barry blinked, and before he could craft a response, Lena showed him the photos from the beach party. “You recognize these, I’m sure.”

“I do. I’ve already corroborated my friends’ alibis for the day of their daughter’s tragic death. If this is about that, then I have to say, I’m a little offended. Their death was already ruled an accident by your department, and I’m sure that Julian and Clara would like the chance to achieve closure rather than having the wound reopened.”

“How many people were at your beach party?”

Barry blinked, and his smile faded. Caught you.

“It was just us four.”

“Not much of a party.”

“I didn’t say it was a party.”

“The Kensington did.”

“Well, maybe they wanted to call it a party, but—”

“Actually, you did too,” Harris interrupted. “When I spoke with you on the phone, you said they were at the party, and you’d see if you could dig through all of the photos you took of guests and find some with them.”

“Ooh, more photos,” Lena added. “That will actually help us a lot. Do you think you can show us some of those photos, Mr. Feingold? Some that don’t have Julian and Clara in them?”

Barry took a half-step behind his desk, an instinctive attempt to shield himself. “I

deleted them already.”

Lena lifted her eyebrow. “Do you always delete photos you take at parties?”

“My wife sends them to the people who want them, then deletes them.”

“No problem. Can you give us the names of some people who were there so I can see their photos?”

Barry paled a shade. “No, I’m not going to violate their privacy for a witch hunt.”

“So we should go to the press with our suspicions and inform them that you’ve elected not to cooperate with the investigation?”

That was a bluff. If Barry refused to cooperate and Lena tried to force the issue, her superiors would immediately quash it and reprimand or possibly suspend her for pursuing a case that was supposed to be closed. She needed to hope that Barry wouldn’t know that.

He didn’t. His left eye twitched, and then he said in a soft and slightly hoarse voice. “Can we talk off the record?”

Lena smiled. “Sure.” That was another bluff, but what he didn’t know wouldn’t kill him.

Barry sighed and sat heavily in his chair. “Okay. There was no party. Julian called me and said there was an emergency and he needed help. He said that he and his wife needed to stay at my place for the day, and they needed to have proof that they were there. I told him to come over and bring swimsuits, and we’d figure something out.”

“And it never occurred to you to ask what this emergency was?” Harris asked.

“No.”

Lena didn't believe that for a second. She was almost certain that Barry had helped with a similar emergency back in May when Derek Hill was found dead.

But she would save that for later. Right now, her focus was on Lila Kensington.

“Tell me everything you know,” she told Barry, “and maybe I won't ask for an FTC inquest into every dollar that's passed through Arcturus Investments in the past fifteen years.”

Barry paled and nodded. “All right. All right. I'll tell you what I know.”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Lena had Harris call the Kensingtons posing as campaign managers offering to help him with his upcoming run for city council. Julian enthusiastically agreed to meet them at his home as soon as he returned at three that afternoon.

That gave them about two hours. Lena spent fifty minutes of that driving back to the Flats precinct. As soon as she was there, she and Harris strategized.

“We still only have Barry’s word against his. Barry has a lot of dirt on him, but in terms of what’s provable, Julian has a lot more dirt on Barry. He can make this look like they had a falling out and Barry’s trying to throw dirt on him.”

“Will people believe that?”

“It doesn’t matter. Against someone like Julian Kensington, we need to be airtight. That’s where this conversation comes in.”

“You’re trying to get him to confess?”

“Not him. Clara.”

“We think she’s involved?”

“I think she helped cover it up. If not, then he threatened her to keep it quiet. If we can scare her and convince her that the safest thing for her to do is be honest, she might go for it.”

“You think she’s that stupid?”



“I think she’s a drug addict. On her best days, she’s paranoid. On her worst days, she’s borderline delusional. If we push her the right way, she’ll crack.”

“And if we push both of them the wrong way, we lose the case and our jobs.”

“No one said this came without risk.”

Harris sighed. “Sometimes I really wish I’d been Shawna’s partner instead of yours.”

“You only wish that because you think she’s hot.”

“I think you’re hot. I also think you’re crazy. I was taught from a very young age not to stick it in crazy.”

“Were you planning to stick it in me?”

“No, but I’m beginning to think that working with you is just as dangerous?”

She grinned at him. “Embrace the danger, Damien. That’s how you get Detective III.”

“You know, the pension for Detective II isn’t that bad.”

The two of them ceased the banter as they drove toward Autumn Downs. It was a lot harder to joke around when the risk was in the future. Now that they were driving straight toward the potential end of their careers, laughter seemed a lot less appropriate.

But Lila deserved justice, and this was their best chance at finding it.

They reached the neighborhood to find a lot of people out and about, walking through

the carefully manicured parks and chatting across their driveways with neighbors. All eyes turned toward the police cruiser as it headed toward the Kensington House.

That was fine with Lena. The more people watching this, the better. If word got out that Julian was under investigation, it could turn public opinion in favor of bringing him to justice, and maybe they could convince the department to back them even if they didn't get a confession.

"Oh, hell," Harris said.

"What?"

Harris pointed to the sidewalk three houses down from the Kensingtons and Lena saw the one person she didn't want here walking purposefully ahead. "Son of a bitch."

She pulled the car in front of him, coming up on the curb three yards in front. Nathan Harlow flinched and stared wide-eyed at her as she rolled down the window.

"No."

He blinked. "What?"

"Don't play stupid. It's not cute on you."

He grinned. "You're not the first woman who's told me that."

"Listen to the first woman. Turn around and go home."

"I'm not going home."

"Then go anywhere else. We're handling the Kensington."

Nate frowned. “You weren’t at the office earlier. I went to talk to you there, and you weren’t there. I was going to tell you that I read Lila Kensington’s diary. It has evidence in there of Julian’s illegal activities. She talked about arguing with her dad the week before her murder and telling him that she knew he’d killed a man.”

Lena blinked. “How did you get her diary?”

“The same way I’m about to get it now. They won’t be home for a while. I know it’s wrong to break into someone’s house, and if I have to go to jail for it, I will. But he took it, and unless he got rid of it, it’s still in his house.”

“He almost certainly got rid of it,” Lena said, “but this is good. Listen to me. You already told me about this diary.”

“What? No I did—”

“Oh for God’s... Listen, Nate. You already told me about this diary. We know all about Julian’s illegal activities with his business partners. Now, when we tell Julian, we’ll tell him it’s because you showed us the diary.”

“They won’t believe it if I’m not there.”

“Go repeat that in a mirror somewhere and ask yourself if it sounds as stupid to you as it does to me. But find that mirror in a different neighborhood.”

Nate looked past her at the Kensington house. “But if I can get—”

”Stop.” Lena looked around at the neighbors, straining to hear. A few of them were close enough that they might pick up a stray word or two. She turned her eyes back to Nate. ”Do not follow us. We will handle it. You can only make it worse. Trust me.”

Nate looked at her for a long moment. Then he sighed and nodded. “All right.”

“All right.”

She backed out and finished driving to the Kensingtons.

Julian and Clara showed up five minutes after Lena parked. Julian flinched when he saw them, and looked like he was thinking about driving away for a moment. Then he sighed and got out of the car.

“Officers, this is a bad time. I’m here to meet with people about my upcoming campaign.”

Harris smiled at him. “Pleased to meet you, sir. I’m Mick Hunley.”

Julian paled. Then he reddened. “What’s the meaning of this?”

“Julian...” Clara whispered, clinging to his shoulder.

“Go inside, Clara,” Julian commanded.

“Good idea,” Lena interjected. “Let’s all go inside.”

“No,” Julian replied. “You’re not welcome in my house.”

“You don’t want to talk about the diary?”

Clara gave a little cry. The color that had just come to Julian’s face vanished. He swallowed and looked nervously around at the neighbors, staring at the scene as it unfolded.

“We can talk out here if you want,” Harris offered.

Julian shook his head. “No. Come inside.”

Lena smiled. “Wonderful. I sure do appreciate it.”

Julian fixed a look on her that drove away any doubt in Lena’s mind that he was capable of murder.

The officers followed the couple inside. Clara immediately said, “Lila didn’t know what she was talking about. She—”

“Clara, go upstairs,” Julian interrupted.

“Oh no,” Lena corrected. “Both of you stay right where you are.”

“You’re here to interrogate me,” Julian insisted. “My wife has nothing to do with this.”

“I’m here to interrogate both of you. And what exactly does your wife have nothing to do with?”

Julian realized his mistake and paled again. “Your suspicions.”

“Ah. Well, that’s where you’re wrong. I very much suspect both of you.”

Clara protested again. “She was just angry at us. We caught her using, and—”

“Clara, enough!” Julian interrupted. To the officers, he said, “This is ridiculous. Your department ruled her death an accident. Did LAPD reopen the case?”

“Why don’t we focus on the diary in which your daughter revealed her knowledge of your illegal activities with Barry Feingold?”

“No. Answer my question.”

Harris replied to that one. “Or maybe you can tell us why Barry might have had a change of heart and told us that he lied about the beach party after you told him you had an emergency and needed proof that you were at his house the day of your daughter’s death.”

Clara gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. “Oh my God.”

“Clara, go upstairs!”

“No one’s leaving this room,” Lena said, “not until we have some answers.”

“This is an outrage,” Julian said. “We’re not answering any more questions. I’m calling my lawyer and charging the LAPD and both of you for harassment. As for the diary, that was stolen properly illegally handed to you and is nothing more than the delusions of a young woman under the influence of prescription drugs. If the information in that diary gets out to anyone, I’ll sue you for defamation. You can tell your pool boyfriend the same thing.”

“You can tell me yourself.”

Lena’s blood froze.

Oh God, please let me be imagining things.

Clara gasped again and said, “Oh God. Julian, he’s here.”

“I see him, Clara,” Julian snapped.

God damn it. Nate, you fucking idiot.

“Go ahead, Julian,” Nate the world’s dumbest superhero said. “Tell me that Lila was wrong about everything. Tell me your wife isn’t a coke-sniffing junkie, and you’re not killing people for getting in the way of your illegal business dealings.

“Nathan, shut up!” Lena snapped.

Might as well look at the schmuck now. He’s not going to go away just because you really wish he would. She turned toward him to see him standing in the close-fisted defiance of the righteously angry young. She wished with every fiber of her being that she could go back in time ten minutes and find a reason to arrest him and lock him in the back of her car.

“You’re deluded,” Julian said, “All of you. I presume you don’t have an arrest warrant, so you can leave my house. My lawyer will be contacting your department. As for you, Nathan, you’ve just made the worst enemy you could possibly have.”

“What? You’re going to kill me too?”

“Damien, get him out of here!” Lena snapped. “Mr. and Mrs. Kensington, I apologize.” She glared at Nate. “Mr. Harlow is clearly extraordinarily stupid. This conversation has nothing to do with him, and he’ll be arrested for obstruction of justice.”

Nathan stared at her in shock. Then his face flamed in anger. “I knew it. I was right all along. I should never have listened to Marco.”

Lena frowned. “Who’s Marco?”

“You don’t care! You’re not here to find justice for Lila! These assholes killed her!” He jabbed his finger at the Kensington. “Her own parents! Her own mother and father who are supposed to love her and take care of her, and they fucking killed her, but you don’t care because they’re rich, and—”

“Damien, get him out of here!”

Just then, Clara burst into sobs and collapsed to the floor. Julian’s trembling worsened, and he said in a strained voice. “You’ve made my wife cry. Leave my house now.”

“No,” Clara said.

“Clara—”

“I killed her. Nate’s right. I’m supposed to be her mommy and love her, and I killed her!”



## Page 25

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

I stare at Clara in shock. Julian stares at Clara in shock. Detective Ramirez stares at Clara in shock. I can't see the other cop's face, but I think it's a good bet that he's staring at her in shock too.

Julian is the first to recover. "This confession is under duress! I demand that you leave my house!"

Detective Ramirez is the next person to recover. "Harris, search the house for the diary."

"You have no right—" Julian starts.

"Your wife just confessed to a murder, and both of you corroborated the existence of a diary possessed by the victim that could provide material evidence to a motive for such a murder."

Julian blinks. "You said you..." Then he reddened. "We're not speaking without a lawyer present."

"Feel free to call one. Your wife can make her own decisions. Mrs. Kensington? Would you like to talk to us?"

Clara nods, and Julian says, "Clara! Don't talk to them without—"

"You speak again, and I'll arrest you for obstruction of justice."

Julian's shade deepens until it matches the color of a ripe tomato. Then he laughs and

looks around, his eyes wild. He can't accept that he's not in control.

I'm not surprised to see his eyes settle on me. I'm the least powerful person here. He must be able to find a way out through me.

"I'm going to ruin your life, you meddling little asshole. How dare—"

"Mr. Harlow," Detective Ramirez asks sweetly. "Would you like to press charges against Mr. Kensington for making criminal threats?"

I meet Julian's eyes and say, "I'm not sure yet."

"We were arguing," Clara begins.

"Clara, shut up!"

"I think I might press charges, actually," I say.

Julian turns to me. "You..." then he laughs again and grins. He thinks it's an angry and intimidating grin. It looks to me more like a cornered and wounded animal realizing he's about to be eaten. How ironic that it's his own fangs that will consume him.

Speaking of, here comes the other cop. He's holding the diary. What's left of it anyway. It's been burnt, and all that's left are the spine, the cover and a few charred pages.

"Any reason why you burnt your daughter's diary, Mr. Kensington?"

Julian looks sick. "Lawyer."

Detective Ramirez shrugs. “Works for me. Harris, take him to the car.”

“We won’t speak without a lawyer, right Clara? Clara!”

Clara looks away from him. “I’m sorry, Julian.”

“Clara. Listen—take your hands off me!”

“Nope. You’re under arrest.”

“You can’t... you... Clara!”

“I think I’ll press those criminal threat charges after all.”

Julian looks at me and says, “You fucking shit stain. I will ruin you. You little...”

Anything else he wants to say is cut off by his own front door closing in his face.

I turn back to Clara, and Detective Ramirez says, “You have to go too, kid. This is an official statement. You can’t be here.”

My anger flares up at that. I’m finally about to see justice done for Lila. I want to hear it. I want to hear her killer confess. I want the satisfaction I never got with Annie.

But I know better. I nod and head outside.

The other cop, Harris, I think Lena called him, is on the porch smoking a cigarette. He offers me one, and I decline.

“Smart kid. These’ll kill you.”

“Then why do you smoke?”

He shrugs. “Everybody dies.”

He’s not wrong.

I look at the police car to see Julian shaking with fear. He’s done for, and he knows it.

Isn’t he?

I turn to Harris and ask, “You think they’ll put him away for this?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. His political career is over, for sure. Folks draw the line at murdering your own kid. But if by put away you mean prison time?” He shrugs again. “Clara’s copping to the act of murder. She’s probably going to say that he helped cover it up, and he obviously did, but his legal team is going to fight hard to make her look untrustworthy and him look like a caring husband duped by a drug addict wife. They’re probably going to succeed. I think he gets hit for obstruction of justice, attempt to destroy evidence, and maybe conspiracy after the fact. Unless we find something that unequivocally connects him to Derek Hill, he gets a suspended sentence of eighteen months and a few years of probation.” He hooks a thumb back into the house. “She’s going down though. Involuntary manslaughter at best, but since Julian’s legal team is going to want to paint her as a banshee to make him look good, I think she’ll get murder in the second. She’ll get twenty-five and serve fifteen.”

“That’s it? That’s all she gets for killing her child?”

Harris gives me a tight-lipped smile. “You were wrong about cops not giving a shit about the victims of rich people. But you were close to right about the fact that rich

people get away with murder. It's one of the shitty things about the world that hasn't been fixed yet and probably won't be fixed for a long time. But she'll come out broken. She's forty-three, and if her record is to be believed—and I think it is—she's been on cocaine for most of her life. Fifteen years without in a maximum-security prison, and she'll come out a shell. If she's lucky.”

“Still seems like a cakewalk compared to what Lila got.”

Harris shrugs once more. “We take what we can get.”

I look back at Julian. He's crying now, but I doubt it's guilt. He's shown no guilt at all. Clara's shown guilt, but Julian? Nothing. I don't even think he's capable of worrying about anyone else. The tears he cries now are for himself.

“So what happens now?”

“We take them to jail and book them. They post bond before the day's over. Then they confer with their fancy lawyers, who try to intimidate Clara into walking back her confession and claiming duress. They file a motion to dismiss, then a motion to delay, then a motion to transfer jurisdiction. When all those motions are denied, we finally get started with the court process.”

“How long does all that take?”

“Two years at least before a verdict.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah. Be grateful you don't have to deal with that part.”

We fall silent for a while. Harris finishes his cigarette and lights another. “You don't

want to be inside?” I ask him.

He shakes his head. “Nah. I’ve seen it all before. They’re so sorry for what they did, they’d give anything to take it back, they were so upset they weren’t thinking clearly. It was the drugs, it was the alcohol, it was everything but their own fault. Lena will fill me in on the details I need to know. Besides, I think Mrs. Kensington will be more comfortable talking to her without us men in the room.”

“Ah. Got it.”

He looks at me and says, “You got damned lucky, kid. There are a thousand reasons why you should be either dead or in jail right now. You very nearly ruined our chances of finding justice for Lila Kensington.”

I lower my eyes, and he puts his hand on my shoulder. “But, that little bit about the diary probably saved our asses. Officially, I can’t condone your choice to burglarize someone’s home, but unofficially, you did good.”

I lift my head again and smile at him. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. One more thing: quit using. Seriously.”

I chuckle sheepishly. “Yeah. I will.”

“I mean it. That’s a one-way street to the only kind of life that I can confidently say is worse than death. Drugs don’t fix anything. They just numb you so you don’t have to face the pain. But they eat away at you until all that’s left is pain.

“You just have to face the pain. It sucks. Bad. I know it. I lost my sister when I was fifteen. Ex-boyfriend caught her kissing a new boyfriend. Shot her, the new boyfriend and my mother. My mother survived, but my sister and her new boyfriend didn’t.”

My eyes widen. “Damn. I’m sorry.”

“Me too. But you get through it. Maybe you don’t ever get over it, but you get through it. But only if you choose to.”

The door opens and Clara Kensington walks out, hands cuffed behind her back, head bowed. She doesn’t look at me.

Harris grimaces. “Shit. I forgot to call for another car.”

“Take her inside,” Detective Ramirez says. “You can wait for the other car there. I don’t want her anywhere Julian can see her. I’m going to talk to the kid.”

Harris nods and turns Clara around. With surprising gentleness, he says, “We’ll take a seat on the couch, ma’am.”

Maybe the gentleness isn’t surprising. Maybe I just don’t like that she’s receiving anything even close to sympathy.

Detective Ramirez waits until the door closes, then grabs my arms and leads me to the side of the house. “Where are we going?” I ask.

”Somewhere, no one can read my lips.”

She keeps going until we’re behind the house and out of view of the neighbors who at this point are all taking pictures of Julian Kensington in his car. I wonder how many they took of me on the porch talking to Harris.

Detective Ramirez looks at me and says, “If you repeat anything I’m about to tell you, I will a) deny that I talked to you, and b) have you arrested for possession, burglary, obstruction of justice, harassment and every other charge I can think of. Are

we crystal?”

“Crystal.”

“Good.” She sighed. “The only reason you’re hearing what I’m about to say is that you might have been the last person to put a smile on Lila Kensington’s face. Despite the fact that I’m a cop and clearly only value rich people with power, that matters to me.”

“Yeah.” I shuffle my feet. “Sorry about that.”

“Shut up. Clara Kensington was on meth when she killed Lila. Lila caught her and they got into an argument over her drug use. At some point, Lila accused her of covering up Julian’s murder of Derek Hill. According to Clara, she threatened to go to us with evidence that could prove all of it. Clara said that at that point, she grabbed Lila and threw her to the ground. She says her intention was to scare her. Instead, Lila hit her head on the edge of their coffee table.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah. Anyway, she—Clara—freaked out and called Julian. Julian came downstairs and stripped Lila into underwear and a t-shirt, then dumped her body in the pool while Clara cleaned up the blood. Then they called their friend and arranged the alibi.”

“Why did he strip her first?”

“Probably because she got blood on her sweater and pants.”

“Got it. That makes sense.”



I look back toward the front of the house. “Harris told me that Julian will probably get away without prison time.”

“Harris didn’t know that Clara was going to confess to his involvement in Derek Hill’s death when he said that. It’s still going to be an uphill battle, and we probably will only get him for conspiracy unless we get lucky and find tangible physical evidence, but I think we get him for five to ten.”

I chuckle bitterly. “Five to ten for two murders, huh?”

“And the destruction of his reputation and political career. Not to mention financial ruin since Scimitar will vote him off of everything even remotely attached to him. It’s not everything, but it’s not chopped liver.”

“Yeah. I guess not.”

“You take what you can get, kid.” She looks at me. “Did Harris give you the ‘good job but do it again, and you’ll probably go to prison’ speech?”

“Yeah, he did.”

“Good. What about the ‘quit using’ speech?”

“Yeah. That one too.”

She nods. “Good.”

I hear cars approach the house, and Detective Ramirez says, “That’s my cue, kid. One last piece of advice: Walk to the street back over there. A lot of people are going to want to talk to you if you follow me out to the front of the house.”

I smile. “Sounds good. Thank you. For everything.”

She returns my smile. “Thank you. Now scram.”

I head through the houses behind the Kensington home and come out on a much quieter cul-de-sac. There are a few people out walking around, but I’m in my uniform, and no one cares what the pool boy’s doing. Almost certainly, it’s not anything interesting enough to warrant gossip.

I cast one last look at the Kensingtons’ backyard. I can just see Lila’s bedroom window over the fence. I smile wistfully and allow myself one final memory of Lila’s smile.

Then I look ahead and make my way out of Autumn Downs.

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

The sun's just about set when I arrive at Vivian's home. This time, I go home to shower before coming here, so I'm dressed in a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, and I don't smell like chlorine and stagnant water.

Not that it matters. I'm not here to seduce her.

She answers the door before I knock, and I say, "How do you do that?"

She laughs. There's mirth in her laugh, but there's sadness too. I get it. I feel the same way.

"I have a security camera system. It beeps whenever anyone walks onto my driveway."

She falls silent a moment, and I take a long look at her. She's wearing a pair of jogging shorts and a halter top. Both items hug her body and emphasize the curves of her waist and her breasts. She is absolutely beautiful.

She tilts her head shyly and asks, "So... do you want to come inside?"

I chuckle. "Yeah. I would love to."

She beams and opens the door so I can walk in. Right away, I notice the wrapped stacks of boxes she has in the living room.

"You're moving?"

She sighs. “Yeah. Looks like. I was supposed to sell the house and split the money with my ex during the divorce, but I never did. He finally got tired of waiting and told the court. So, I have to put the house on the market within a month.”

“Well, you might not have to move right away. Maybe it’ll take a while to sell.”

She laughs. “Honey, I’ll have a buyer within two weeks. Neighborhoods like this attract people like flies.”

I catch the double meaning there and chuckle. “Well, someone’s going to get a nice house.”

“It is a nice house,” she agrees. “If only a nice person could live in it one day.”

“You’re a nice person.”

She smiles at me. “You’re only saying that because I let you into my bed.”

“Actually, no. I’m saying it because you listened to me when no one else would, and you comforted me when no one else has. Don’t get me wrong, the sex was nice, but—”

She lifts her eyebrow. “Nice? The sex was nice?”

I grin. “The sex was incredible.”

“There you go. Much better.”

We both laugh and then fall silent. Vivian’s the first to break the silence. “That’s over now, isn’t it?”

I nod. “Yeah. I think so.”

She looks away. “That’s probably for the best. I like you a lot, but... well...”

“You’re twenty years older than me.”

She chuckles and says, “God, that sounds so horrible, especially when you say it.”

“Would it make you feel better if I said you were the best I ever—”

“No,” she interrupts, staring hard at me over her smile. “No, it would not.”

“Well then, I’ll just say that I’ll always treasure what we had together, and I’m really grateful to you for it.”

Her smile softens. “Me too.”

We stand in silence that is both comfortable and awkward for a long moment. Then she says, “Screw it. I’m going to have a drink. Want some?”

“Sure. I’ll take a glass.”

“Good. Let’s sit in the kitchen, though. Staring at those boxes is too depressing.”

I sit in the kitchen and watch her as she opens a bottle of Chardonnay and pours two glasses. I notice the lines at the corners of her eyes, but they only make her look even more beautiful to me.

She hands me a glass, then takes the seat across from me and lifts her own glass. “To treasured memories.”

I lift mine. “To memories.”

We touch glasses and drink. Then I ask, “So where are you moving?”

“Agoura Hills. Do you know where that is?”

“Just inland of Malibu. Yeah, I know. Isn’t that fire country?”

“Everywhere’s somewhere country,” she says. “I’m moving there because it’s quiet and scenic, and the neighbors don’t care what you do as long as you don’t make it their problem.”

“Well, that’s not too far away,” I say. “I could visit you every now and then. Not like... that, but... you know, as a friend.”

She gives me the same sad smile she does at the door. I think she knows as well as I do that tonight will be the last time we see each other. “Yeah. I’d like that.”

She sips her wine, then asks, “So what happened at the Kensington place yesterday? I mean, if you don’t mind telling me.”

“We got them,” I say. “Me and the cops. Clara confessed to killing her, and Julian helped cover it up.”

She purses her lips. “So Clara’s saying she did it?”

“Yeah. You don’t believe her?”

Vivian shrugs. “I don’t know. Maybe. God knows neither of them are the salt of the Earth. But Julian’s worse. Clara’s a drug addict who’s probably gone permanently insane from it, but Julian’s a sociopath. I mean that literally.”

“I believe you. If it makes you feel better, it looks like Clara’s helping the cops put Julian away for a previous murder.”

“A previous murder?”

”Yeah. I guess he killed a guy who wouldn’t sell his software company to him. Or had him killed. He and his business partner covered it up.”

“Jesus.” She shakes her head. “Yeah, I’m going to miss this house, but I will not miss this neighborhood.”

“I don’t blame you. Neither will I.”

“Oh, are you quitting your job?”

“No, but I’m not coming back next summer.”

”You should. It’s good work. Just be more like your friend Marco. Act like an appliance, not a person.”

I laugh at that. She laughs too, but says, “I’m serious! It’s good money. If you can handle the arrogance and immaturity, you can fleece us rich bitches for all we’re worth. And, at the risk of sounding like a hypocrite, don’t sleep with any other lonely divorcees, and don’t make friends with any more rich kids. Just show up, clean the pools, and go home.”

“Yeah, we’ll see. Maybe I’ll come back. I have a feeling I’m going to end up famous, so I don’t know if I can get away with being an appliance anymore.”

She flips her hand. “Oh, you’ll be fine. I guess you don’t have to come back here either if you don’t want to. I just think you should learn to push through adversity

instead of hiding from it.” She looks at me and reddens a little. “Sorry. Getting motherly advice from me is probably the last thing you want.”

“No, it’s okay,” I say, even though she’s right. “I appreciate it.”

We fall silent again, and I sip some more wine. The warmth is starting to caress the outer edges of my senses, and I decide this will be my only glass.

“What do you want to do?” she asks out of nowhere. “With your life?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. Right now, I just want to get out of Cudahy.”

She nods. “You should do something amazing.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. Just something. Something that you can look back on when you’re older and be grateful that you did it. Don’t just drift through life and let it decide where it wants to take you. You go where you want to go.”

She gets a wistful expression when she says that, and I get the sense that her statement is informed by a lifetime of regret. I want to ask her what those regrets are, but I don’t. Some things aren’t meant to share with other people, and I think the best thing I can do for Vivian is allow her to keep her secrets.

She looks me up and down, and a touch of longing comes to her eyes. I know how she feels. I’ll miss her too.

She lifts her gaze to mine and smiles. “Nathan Harlow. Will you share one last glass of wine with me?”



I know what she's really asking me, and I decide that one more beautiful memory won't hurt. "I would love to."

Later, when we move together, it's powerful and intimate and sweet. It's the best goodbye two lovers could have.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

I take the back way to Mrs. Winslow's house. Most of my clients are on this side of the neighborhood now that I've covered just about every house on the other side, but the real reason I take the north entrance is so I don't have to drive past Vivian's house. I don't regret the way we left things, but I worry that if I see her again, neither of us will be able to keep things where we left them, and it's better for both of us if we do.

I almost don't accept Mrs. Winslow's invitation to dinner, but I figure I owe her some closure too. She and I didn't have nearly the same relationship as Vivian and I, but she was as influential in helping me find justice for Lila as I was, so she deserves her own goodbye.

She answers the door and beams at me. "Nate! Why you look dashing as ever!"

"And you look as beautiful as those hydrangeas you take such good care of."

"Oh, stop! You're a tease! Come on in! I've made roast duck for dinner."

My eyes widen as I follow her into the house. "Wow. What's the occasion?"

"To say goodbye, of course!" She turns back to me and smiles. "Don't look so surprised. I've been around a long time. I know that this is the last time you and I will see each other. And that's all right. Some friendships are meant to last a lifetime, and others are meant to last only for a few weeks. Ours is no less valuable for its brevity."

I don't quite know what to say to that, so I only smile.

“Well, have a seat,” she says. “I’ll make you some coffee. I’ll let you take it black this time. You don’t need comfort anymore. Besides, I imagine there’s nothing I could do that could compare to the comfort Vivian Chase gave you.”

I start at that, and she laughs. “Don’t look so embarrassed. You’re a healthy young man, and you’re only doing what all healthy young men do. Besides, Vivian’s ex-husband was trash. Slept with everything female between here and Santa Barbara. At least she waited until after he left to find herself a pretty young thing.”

For the third time, I decide I don’t like Edith as much as I think I do before. But it’s just one dinner, and then I don’t have to deal with her disturbing intuition and disconcerting bluntness.

I sit at the table, and the smell from the kitchen almost makes Edith’s shrewdness and directness bearable. I’ve never had roast duck before, but if it tastes like it smells, this might be the most delicious meal of my life. I guess that’s the silver lining to tonight.

She returns with coffee and sets it in front of me. “The duck should be ready shortly. In the meantime, I want to hear all the details.”

“About what?”

She looks frankly at me. “I thought we discussed that pretending to be foolish isn’t attractive to you.”

I laugh nervously and take a sip of my coffee. “Yeah, I guess we did.”

“Well, then humor me. I’m an old woman, and this is the closest to entertainment I get.”

It’s a little disgusting that her entertainment is hearing all about how two parents

murdered their daughter, but I guess it could just be my perspective. I didn't have any trouble telling Vivian all about it. For that matter, I didn't have any trouble telling Edith all about my suspicions the last time I was here. So why do I feel so strange about it now?

"Well, Clara killed her. They got into an argument, and Lila threatened to expose Julian's criminal activities and tell everyone that Clara was covering for him and that she was doing drugs again. Clara freaked out and pushed her to the ground, and she died."

"Oh, dear."

"Yeah. Julian tossed the body in the pool to make it look like an accident, Clara cleaned up the blood, and then Julian's business partner gave them an alibi."

"Hmm. I figured Barry would do that. He was very helpful when Julian had Derek Hill killed."

I pause with my coffee cup halfway to my lips. "How did you know about that?"

"Word travels fast in this neighborhood. You know that. Drink your coffee, dear."

I sip my coffee. This brew is brighter than the last one, slightly tangy. "Is this a new blend?"

"Yes. Colombian Supreme. I have no idea what that means, but I thought I'd try something different. Do you like it?"

"It's... interesting."

She laughs. "I'll take that as a no. Well..." she looks over at my half-full mug, and

her eyes harden. “That should be enough. You don’t have to drink the rest.”

An alarm goes off in my head, but I have no idea why. What do I possibly have to be afraid of?

“It’s too bad that Lila had to get mixed up in all of this,” Edith says offhandedly. “But I don’t think Julian would ever have been pushed far enough if she hadn’t come forward with what she knew.”

Another, far louder alarm goes off in my head. I swallow thickly. “What? What are you...”

I swallow again. My throat feels strangely thick.

“It’s too bad that you had to get involved in this too,” she says. “But when an opportunity comes, you take it. You’re never guaranteed another.”

I swallow a third time and frown. My ears are buzzing. “What are you... What’s... You...”

“I told you that if you wanted to punish someone, you had to be patient. But you also have to be shrewd. And when the time comes to strike, you have to strike fast and hard.”

I lift my eyes to hers. It’s a lot harder than it should be. My head feels so heavy.

Edith’s smile is gone. Even the fake one she wears is gone. Her lips are set in a grim line, and her eyes are cold and flinty. I realize with a shiver that her expression is a dead ringer for Julian Kensington’s.

“I missed my opportunity to punish Oliver Kensington,” she says. “I’ll never forgive

myself for that.”

“What... Oliver?”

“Julian’s father,” she explains. “He was a beautiful man. Eyes like a summer sky and hair like the sun that shines in it. An absolutely perfect body too. I took one look at him, and I was head over heels.” She sips her coffee. “I was a foolish girl, of course. He was married to Annette Hawthorne. I was pretty in my youth, but Annette...” she whistled. “She was the kind of girl men leave their wives for. The problem was that she was his wife, and all I was was the silly girl who would do things for him that she wouldn’t.” She smiled bitterly. “And I was happy to. My body belonged to him because the things he made me feel, oh...”

She looked at me, still wearing that bitter, contemptuous smile. “Vivian Chase was like that for you. The pinnacle of lust. A body so perfect that your entire will becomes slave to it.”

I know she shouldn’t be talking about Vivian like this. I also know I should say something about it, but I can’t think of anything to say. For some reason, all of my thoughts are slow and muddled.

“Anyway, that’s enough of that. Vivian, it turns out, is a good person. When she realized she was stealing you from yourself, she let you go. Oliver Kensington wasn’t a good person. When he realized he was stealing me from myself, he just kept stealing until there was nothing left of me. When I became pregnant with Julian, I thought that maybe he would see, maybe he would understand how much he meant to me, and maybe I could mean the same to him.” She shook her head. “Foolish girl.”

I frown. “Wait. You’re... you’re Julian Kensington’s mom?”

“I am. I gave birth to him in a shitty room in a shitty hospital ran by shitty doctors.

Alone. I held him to my breast and sang to him, and for one hour, I thought if I could at least have him, then I could find a way to be happy. Then Oliver showed up and took him from my arms, and when I protested, he told me that if I made any trouble for him, he would have me killed.”

My eyes start to close, and my head starts to sink, but when I see Edith watching me like a hawk watching a field mouse, I force myself to sit straight. “Yer... what’d you do?”

“I drugged you. I can’t leave any loose ends.”

My eyes widen. At least, I think they do. I’m so foggy right now, I can’t really tell. “What? You... drugged...”

“Yes. I drugged you.” She sips her coffee again and sighs. “I waited for years for my chance to get revenge on Oliver. I watched him in his home, followed him to his work, stalked him when he vacationed. I carried a gun for thirty years, waiting for the chance to use it, but I never found it. He died peacefully in his sleep, in the arms of his loving fucking family, while my son held the hands of a woman who wasn’t his mother.”

Her lips press into a thin line. “I hated Julian for that.”

“Wasn’t his fault,” I slur. “Wasn’t him who hurt you.”

She laughs. “Dear, it’s not about what’s right or wrong. It’s about what’s fair. I had my life stolen from me by a Kensington. So I stole a Kensington’s life.”

It should have hit me already, but whatever drugs Edith used on me are powerful enough that it’s only when she says it directly that I realize what she’s saying.

“You... you killed Lila?”

“No, dear. Clara killed her. I just helped her transition from cocaine to methamphetamines. Those lines you saw weren’t cocaine. They were powdered crystal. I taught her to snort it because it was easier to hide the physical symptoms of meth use that way.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. Maybe I’m dreaming. The world is spinning like I’m dreaming.

“Meth is to cocaine what espresso is to chocolate. It’s very easy to get someone hooked on it if they’ve tried cocaine. But it makes you far more paranoid. You’re probably aware of this. I realize that you’re a heroin junkie, but I’m sure you’ve interacted with meth heads before.”

“You... you gave her drugs?”

“I did. And I befriended Lila, much the same way I befriended you. Just like you, she had parents who didn’t care about her. She couldn’t talk to them about her problems. But she could talk to me.” Edith grins. It looks like the leer of a death’s head. “Her Grandma Edith.”

“You...” I stand, but the action makes me dizzy. I hear the thud of my body falling to the ground, but I don’t feel it.

Edith sips her coffee, then stands. “I pushed Lila in the right direction. Helped her discover what her father was up to on her own. Told her to write everything down in her diary to help her deal with her feelings. Then, when I felt she had enough, I suggested that the right thing to do was to go to the police.

“It wasn’t a guarantee. I had to hope that I knew them well enough to know how they



would act. And I did. Clara started taking meth constantly. Lila caught her mother tweaking and in her immature rage threatened to expose her. Clara reacted the way any paranoid tweaker would. Violently. And Julian—ever his father's son—made sure that none of it could come back to hurt them.”

She walks to me and looks down. Her face is blurry, but I can see those eyes, those vulture's eyes. “Except that you were there. You saved everything, Nate. You saw Lila and of course you fell in love with her. She was breathtakingly beautiful, and she was your age. As soon as she told me about you and told me that you left your vacuum at her house, I knew that was the day she had to be pushed. You needed to see her dead, and if you did, your zeal for justice would push you to discover Clara's and Julian's evil. Thank you.”

“But... why... why...”

“Like I said. I can't leave loose ends. You don't strike me as intelligent enough to figure out my involvement in these deaths, but I can't take the risk that I'm wrong about that. So, you're going to be discovered with a very high dose of Oxycontin in your blood. I will find you in the morning in my pool. I'll be hysterical. I'll probably have to move. For my mental health.”

“No... no...”

I intend to shout those words, but I only mumble them. I intend to fight her as she drags me to the pool, but I only hang limp. I have no idea how she manages to drag my body out of her house to the pool. The only thing I can think of is that her hate somehow gives her strength.

I don't feel the water wash over my head. I don't really even feel the water fill my lungs as I struggle to breathe. I know I'm dying, but my body and mind are far away.

I think of Lila as I struggle weakly. It's a cruel irony that Julian and his mother both drowned teenagers in their pools. Edith thinks she was robbed of her family. I think she had more of Julian than she realized.

My last thought before darkness takes me is of Vivian's smile. Her cool lips on mine, her warm body wrapped around me.

At least I got one last beautiful memory before I was taken from the world.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Then I feel strong hands wrap under my armpits. I feel my head break the surface, and the next thing I know, cool, soft lips press to mine.

A moment later, I gasp and cough. Water spews from my mouth, and those strong arms turn me over to finish coughing out all the water. My head is still fuzzy, but I'm far more alert than I am a moment ago. "Vivian," I moan. "You saved me."

"No such luck, kid. But if it makes you feel better, you're only the second guy to feel my lips on his."

I turn over to see Detective Ramirez grinning down at me. In the background, I see Detective Harris pinning a shrieking Edith Winslow to the ground and putting handcuffs on her. Edith is snarling and spitting and spouting curse words at him. All traces of the sweet old lady she wore as a mask are gone.

"What the hell?"

I try to sit up, but a wave of dizziness washes over me. Detective Ramirez catches me before I hit my head on the concrete and gently lowers me to the ground. "Whoa. Take it easy there. We've got EMS on the way to make sure you don't OD. In the meantime, you and I are going to continue to hang out like chums. Try not to pass out on me again, though. Not that I didn't enjoy the kiss, but Harris will get jealous if you get another one."

I chuckle, and that leads to another coughing fit. Then the world spins around me once more.

“Hey, what’d I say about passing out on me?”

Too late.

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Three hours later, I’m in the hospital sipping decaf tea—no coffee for another twenty-four hours to give my heart a break—and listening to Detective Ramirez explain how she and Harris figured out that Edith Winslow was the one behind all the killings.

“Julian turned out to be quite the canary,” she says. “Starts spouting off how Clara started doing meth a few months ago after one of the neighbors got her hooked on it. Said that Lila was leaving the house for hours at a time and coming home angry at him. He thought she was seeing a boy, but I figured if there was a neighbor messing with Clara, maybe that neighbor was also involved with Lila. So, we talked to Clara, and she named Edith Winslow.”

“How did you figure out she was the one who planned everything?”

“We didn’t. We came over to ask if she had heard Clara let anything slip about Julian’s activities. We were going to let her slide on the drug stuff if she gave us something we could use. We just so happened to hear the splash when she dumped you in the pool. Considering our recent experiences with pools, we decided to see what that noise was. The rest, you know.”

I grin. “You kissed me and brought me back to life.”

“Careful, sleeping beauty,” she replies, returning my grin, “or I might make you buy me dinner.”

“Hell, I’ll buy you dinner. I know a damned good taco place.”

“I’m more of a burger gal myself, but I’ll take you up on that. No making out, though. That was a one-time thing due to extraordinary circumstances.”

I laugh. “Sounds good.”

Harris walks in and smiles at me. “Well, well, if it isn’t Romeo. Boy, you’re just bagging girls left and right, aren’t you.”

Heat climbs my cheeks, and Ramirez slaps Harris playfully. “Hey, go easy on the kid. That’s twice in one day he broke the case open for us.”

“Yeah, it is at that. Say, kid, you ever thought of a career as a police officer? We could use unsuspecting schmucks like you.”

I laugh. Then I think about it. Ramirez and Harris catch my expression and share a look with each other. “You get good benefits,” Ramirez says. “Hours are shit, but you get to drive a cool car.”

“And the girls,” Harris adds. He whistles. “You think you get girls now, wait until they see you in a uniform.”

“He’s right,” Ramirez says. “You’ll get so much tail you’ll forget all about old Lena Ramirez.”

I laugh again, and I’m pretty sure that I’m the same color as the apple the nurse brings me earlier. Harris and Ramirez share a grin, and Ramirez pats my shoulder. “We’ll give you some rest, kid. Keep your phone on, though. We might want to check up on you every now and then. See how you’re doing.”

I smile at them. “I’d like that.”

They file out, and I lay back on the bed and think about the future.

I've spent so long hating cops for not doing anything about my sister. Up until earlier this afternoon, I still hated them for not doing anything about Lila Kensington. Today showed me how wrong I was about all of that.

Ramirez and Harris did everything they could for Lila. If not for them, I'd be dead and Edith, Clara and Julian would still be out free. True, I helped, but if I'm being honest, it's like Harris said. I got lucky.

But maybe, if I worked at it, I wouldn't have to be lucky. And girls do like guys in uniform.

I close my eyes and soon, I'm asleep. I dream of Lila again. She's sitting in the park, the same one we walk through in the earlier dream. She's sitting next to another girl. When I get close, I see that the other girl is Annie.

They both look up at me and smile. Annie waves, and Lila blows me a kiss. Then they get up and walk away into the trees.

I could follow them, but I don't. Even though I'm dreaming, I know that they're saying goodbye. It's time for them to move on.

And it's time for me to do the same.

“Wait! Nate!”

I turn around, and Natalie throws her arms around me and kisses me. I hold her close and return the kiss. Natalie’s kisses are a little awkward and not as Vivian’s kisses were, but I kind of like that they’re a little awkward. We’re each other’s first serious relationship, and these awkward little kisses remind me that we’re new. We’re discovering each other, and that makes everything more meaningful.

She pulls away and says, “Be careful around all those cougars. Don’t let one of them snatch you away from me.”

I sincerely hope that she doesn’t read too much into the heat in my cheeks. “I won’t.”

I mean that, too. I like Natalie a lot. I haven’t been with her long enough to know if I love her yet, but I’ve been with her long enough to know that she’s more special than anyone I’ve ever met before, and that includes Vivian.

She kisses me again. “Bye! I’ll see you in two weeks!”

She’s going to visit her family in San Jose for two weeks before coming back here to take summer classes. Well, a summer class. She’s really staying here to be with me.

I’m pretty sure I do love her, now that I think about it.

I watch her run back to the campus with a smile on my face. She’s so upbeat and happy all the time. When I’m with her, it’s easy to feel the same way. I don’t know what the hell she sees in my mooney ass.

I shake my head and chuckle, then get on the bus. The trip to Cudahy will take about an hour and a half, which means I'll get there just in time to pick up the van. I only have four pools to clean today, so I should be done in time to surprise Mom when she gets home from her A.A. meeting. Maybe I'll stop for pizza on the way. Not at Leo's, though. There are days when I think that the best thing about Mom getting sober is that we can have actual pizza and not the sloppy greaseball crap they serve at Leo's.

The bus arrives, and I put my bike on the rack and take a seat. I watch the campus pull away as we start moving, and I can't help but grin. Two more years, and I'll have my criminal justice degree. As soon as I have that degree, Detective Ramirez promised she'll get me a spot in the Academy.

I hope that the old judge who gives me a second chance four years ago is still around when I get my badge. I'd love for him to see that I've made that second chance count.

My phone buzzes, and I pull it out of my pocket. It's a text from Marco.

Hey, officer Harlow. My girl's having a birthday party tomorrow. Get your mom to come too, yeah?

I chuckle and send back. I like how you just assume I can go.

Almost immediately, I receive. Don't be an asshole, bro. Bring your mom. It's a dry party anyway, so unless you're worried about her and soda, she'll be fine. Besides, who knows what you've told her about me? I don't want her to think I'm taking you out boosting.

I laugh and reply, Sounds good. I'll see you tomorrow.

You better. I know where you live, ese.

I put my phone away and look out the window. It's a beautiful day.



Two hours later, I pull up to the gate. The security guard leans out and says, “Hey! Look who it is! Good to see you, buddy.”

I smile and wave. “Good to see you too, Danny.”

We chat for a few minutes, then Danny opens the gate, and I drive the beautiful blue and white van of the prestigious Best Pool Cleaners into sunny Autumn Downs.