



Someone Like You

Author: *Egypt Cynae*

Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult

Description: Dr. Giselle Champagne spends her days helping others hold their marriages together—while quietly unraveling inside. Widowed and disenchanted with love, she's vowed never to love again. But when Casimir Perez walks into her office, she finds her heart coming back to life.

Casimir seems to have it all—wealth, power, and the ideal marriage. But quietly, he's emotionally starved and suffocating in a shell of a marriage. In Giselle, he finds more than a psychologist. He finds a connection that is intense from the start. A connection that is powerful yet forbidden.

Bound by ethics and tormented by heartache, they both find it impossible to deny the fire that burns between them. Every whispered word, every furtive glance, and every touch entices them closer to the line that should not be crossed.

But when Casimir makes a bold move to claim the woman his heart and body crave, he risks scandal and breaking Giselle's fragile heart again.

Can Giselle risk a second chance at love, or will fear keep her heart under lock and key?

Total Pages (Source): 90

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

Giselle

Dark, coal-black eyes bore into me, and I tried to ignore how they made me feel inside. I glanced back at my notes. It felt as if he could read every thought I had, but he wasn't judging me.

Every appointment went this way, with me trying to ignore the way his eyes caressed me, the beautiful tilt of his lips when he smiled at me, and how he thoughtfully listened to me as if he genuinely wanted to hear my opinions and counsel. Not just because I was the psychologist but because he cared. I shook my head because that was crazy. And the sexual chemistry had only grown in the passing months. It had become so potent that I avoided shaking his hand whenever they arrived and departed now. He felt it just like I did.

I wished that it didn't exist, but it did. Every appointment was becoming harder to take, even though I knew I should cancel. I focused my thoughts back on the session at hand.

"Beth, how does it make you feel when you hear Casimir say that he feels you aren't committed to him?" I asked as I toyed with the cross that sat at my neck.

The hardened edges of Beth Perez's face became stonier than before. Her beautiful eyes were glaciers that could cut right through you.

The daughter of Senator Rob Bradwell and Kim Huffington-Bradwell had been birthed into a life of prestige and privilege. Her father had come from a political family, and her mother was the heir to the Huffington family fortune. Kim was

from the Huffingtons. Their family owned the second-largest energy company in the country. So, it was no secret that when she married Casimir Perez, she had married down. Someone had seen fit to assign him to the chief executive officer position of Glenco, their family's energy company, after her grandfather retired. The company was named after Glenn Huffington, its founder, and her great-great-great-grandfather.

During the first two sessions, Beth made sure that it was all about her. It was important to her that I understood who she was. I honestly didn't care for entitled people, and she was the most entitled of them all. But money knew no barriers, and I wasn't discriminatory when it came to who paid the bill.

"Insulted," Beth Perez replied, bringing my thoughts back to my original question and away from the thoughts of irritation that I harbored for my client. I always held a calm and professional demeanor, but Beth's snide and arrogant attitude had a way of getting underneath my skin—the air of entitlement Beth held to let others know she believed they were beneath her, even her husband.

"Why does insult become the dominant feeling?" I asked with sincere intrigue, tugging the cross on my necklace back and forth on its chain.

Beth flipped long raven-colored hair over her left shoulder as her emerald green eyes turned on her husband for a moment before finding their way back to me. "I have poured everything that I could into making my husband a man of prestige and helping him to get to where he is today, a prominent pillar of the community, building his resources and wealth to a place that he could not have imagined on his own. I have given this man all my time, connections, resources, and energy."

I tried not to flinch when she referred to her husband as "this man."

"What about your love, Beth? That's all I've asked for, but you don't give me that. I find myself giving and giving to you, and it's never enough," Casimir stated in a

matter-of-fact tone.

“Love?” Beth balked and then laughed. “If I didn’t love you, I never would have done all those things, Casimir. That is my expression of love.”

I looked between my two clients before speaking again. The look of hurt that was in Mr. Perez’s eyes seared itself into my brain, and I wondered how it could elude his wife. After all, she was the reason they were here. It had been Bethany Perez who had first reached out and made the appointment to salvage her marriage. She had felt she was “losing Casimir,” in her own words. The first four weeks, she had prodded and needled her husband into coming.

That had been an open admission on her part to me and one that was confirmed through his nonchalant attitude week after week. By the fourth week, his wall had begun to crumble somewhat, and he had opened up, sharing the problems he had with Bethany. When the focus turned to her issues, she wanted no part of the counseling. Yet, Casimir had not allowed her to back out.

I looked at the clock mounted on the wall over my bookshelf and noted that their time was up. “I’m giving you two a homework assignment,” I stated, jotting notes on my iPad.

“Homework?” Beth recoiled. “What are we? Adolescents?”

I bit back the initial response of telling Mrs. Perez that was exactly how she behaved.

“Mrs. Perez, I think there is something that the two of you need to uncover about your relationship. Or perhaps it’s something that you need to recover in your relationship.”

“What could that be?” Mrs. Perez asked, grabbing her large navy blue Chanel bag

and looping it over her shoulder.

“Your love language. It is clear to me that you love each other, but you have very different ways of expressing it. I’m not saying that’s the only problem, but it is a problem. The two of you need to get back to the heart of it all. When you learn to speak his love language, and he learns to speak yours, the healing process will begin. And you’ll both remember why you were married in the first place,” I advised.

“Dr. Champagne, may I ask you a question?” Bethany Perez stated as she stood up and glanced over her shoulder at her husband.

Casimir inhaled deeply as if it would allow him to hold onto his last strand of patience.

“Sure,” I replied patiently but braced for what was to come.

“Are you married?” Bethany Perez asked in an icy tone. It wasn’t her tone but her question that caused me to tug a little harder than normal on my chain.

“No,” I replied.

The bitterness that often rose in me with that question was at the back of my throat like acrid bile. I swallowed it, and I ignored the burning sensation in my chest.

“Have you ever been married?” Bethany asked.

Casimir stood and gently laid his palm on his wife’s lower back, guiding her toward the door. “I think it’s time that we leave.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

“No, I want an answer,” Bethany stated firmly.

“Ms. Champagne’s personal life is not our business,” Casimir gritted through clenched teeth.

“It’s okay, Mr. Perez. She has a right to know. After all, I am here coaching the two of you to find your way to a healthier marriage.” I steeled my heart as I prepared the next words I would speak.

Bethany Perez smiled at her husband as if to say, “I told you so.”

“My husband passed away five years ago. We were married for three years.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Dr. Champagne,” Casimir apologized. Compassion colored his onyx eyes, which appeared to glow regardless of his mood.

I simply nodded in response and schooled my face into a cool mask of professionalism as I rounded my glass desk and escorted them to the door.

“Don’t forget to schedule your next appointment on the way out. As I stated in our opening conversation, I won’t be able to meet next week because I will be out of town, but we can reconvene the week after.”

“We’ll see you then. Have a safe trip,” Casimir Perez stated.

“Thanks,” I responded kindly, turning my smile toward Bethany Perez. “Don’t forget your homework, Mrs. Perez.”

She did not acknowledge the statement but sashayed out of the office in her four-inch navy heels.

“I’ll make sure she does it,” Casimir Perez stated, a slight grimace briefly distorting his handsome features.

With a slight nod, I replied, “You do that.”

“I’m sorry for my wife’s behavior,” he apologized.

I tugged my chain again and replied, “You have to stop doing that.”

“What?”

“Apologizing for her. She’s an adult. Allow her to be who she is, and if any apologies are to be made, she must be the one whomakes them. You cannot apologize for her. Those are her actions and her words. Not yours.”

Casimir Perez smiled that gorgeous smile at me and caused me to tug on my chain again. This time, it broke free from around my neck, and I gasped in shock. It slipped from between my fingers as I tried to clutch it. We both kneeled to grab it at the same time.

“Thank you,” I stated when he grabbed it first.

We stood up, and I held my hand out to retrieve my necklace.

“Allow me,” Casimir Perez stated.

I stared at him for a moment too long, and he held up the necklace with a polite smile.

“Please. Just ensuring it fastens correctly and stays that way.”

I shouldn't have, but I held my hair up off my neck. Casimir moved behind me, placed the necklace around my neck, and fastened it. The feel of his fingers against the back of my neck and the warmth of his breath sent a warm sensation through my body. I inhaled and held my breath, needing the moment to pass.

Just before I released my hair, Casimir Perez dipped his head with his lips so close to the shell of my ear that I could have sworn I felt his lips against my ear.

"I married the wrong woman," he whispered in a deep, sensual voice just before he stepped out from behind me and walked out the door.

I stood frozen in the middle of my office, and I wondered what exactly he meant by that statement.

Giselle & Casimir

Two Weeks Later – Giselle

"Mr. Perez, where's Mrs. Perez?" I asked, smoothing my black and white striped, knee-length pencil skirt over my hips. I shook Casimir's hand, and not for the first time, I noticed it was tapered and slightly smooth, with just a bit of roughness to keep that masculine touch intact.

His eyes wandered to a potted palm in the corner of my office as if it were an interesting object he had just spotted, before he turned his rapturous gaze back on me. "Bethany had an important commitment that she couldn't get out of today."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

I knew that he was lying. It was more than likely that he was not able to talk her into coming today. I knew when I had to skip a week with them, this would happen, but there was no way around it. I had already paid for the non-refundable conference in full, three months prior.

“So, Mr. Perez, I guess it’s just you today. Is there anything specific that you would like to discuss?”

He lowered his six-foot, three-inch frame onto the chocolate leather couch across from my desk. Focusing on the crease lines in the pants of his Versace suit, he cleared his throat before finally looking up at me.

“Dr. Champagne, I have only one concern.”

“And that is?” I could feel the frown lines etching themselves deeply between my eyebrows. My mama hated it when I frowned. She always said that frowns marred the normally smooth planes of my beautiful chocolate skin.

I couldn’t help it, though. I was nervous, alone in the office with my client. My fingers found their way to my cross once more before I recalled what happened the last time he was here. I placed my hands in my lap and angled my head slightly as I focused on him.

“Will I be able to save my marriage?” Casimir Perez’s voice portrayed no emotion.

“Mr. Perez, you know that I can’t—”

“Doctor, I don’t judge people lightly. You have certain guidelines and a code of ethics you must adhere to because of your license, and I respect that, but I’m not an idiot, Dr. Champagne. The man you see sitting before you didn’t come from where people think I do. I’m not who you think I am. So, I know when people are keeping it real with me, and I know when they’re bullshitting me. Truth is, you already drew your conclusions upon meeting Beth and me, and I just want to know what that conclusion is.”

I was shocked at his revelation that he wasn’t who I thought he was. Even the language he used and the way he spoke now, with a guttural, edgy bite and not the usual refined low tone, told me he was someone different than I might imagine. And that appealed to something deeper within me.

“Mr. Perez,” I began again, shaking my head.

Casimir Perez held his hand up. “Dr. Champagne, please. You don’t understand. I’ve invested five years of my life into this marriage, and though my wife made sure that I benefited financially, I have yet to find what I’ve been truly looking for.”

“And what’s that, Mr. Perez?” I asked and rested my chin on my steepled fingers.

“Love.”

“You don’t believe it exists within your marriage?”

“Oh, it exists, Doctor. Just not in the form that I desire.” He crossed his right ankle over his left knee and stretched his arms out along the back of the couch. My eyes instantly dropped to his lap, and I briefly closed my eyes for a moment to try and expel the image I had seen.

The man couldn’t hide his package if he wanted to. And in the position he sat in, it

was very prominent, even in a relaxed state.

Wearing a thoughtful expression, he explained, “My wife loves the fact that she’s married to a black man, which is a quiet rebellion against her grandparents and her mother. That’s a little fact that I didn’t learn until our first year into the marriage. Her father was all for the marriage, but her mother and her maternal grandparents shunned the idea. The Huffingtons would love to appear progressive because it’s great for business, but nothing could be further from the truth. My wife also loves the fact that she can say she’s married. There were a series of broken engagements before I came along, and they weren’t by her choice. My wife is more in love with the idea of marriage than she is with me or the marriage itself. That’s about the only thing that my wife loves, other than continually informing everyone that she pulled me up out of the muck and mire.”

“What does true love look like to you, Mr. Perez?”

“When we can look beyond one another’s flaws and see the true inner beauty that a person carries. When we desire to see our significant other flourish in every area of their lives, we are willing to do whatever we must to be an integral part of that. When it’s so difficult to imagine your life without the other one because they are an interwoven part of you . . . you don’t exist without them. They are your breath and the reason you live each day. You’ll sacrifice everything just to see them happy, and you don’t mind.”

I closed my eyes at the sorrow and regret I heard in his voice. My heart resonated with his words. I understood that he had never known true love, not even in the marriage he was in now. I had experienced it, and I appreciated the beauty of having it in my life. Yet, I wasn’t so sure the adage was true. Was it better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all? Sometimes, I didn’t feel that way because the ache from the loneliness and loss could become unbearable.

“Something tells me that a woman like you might understand that type of love,” he stated when I opened my eyes again.

“Let’s focus on you, Mr. Perez. Can you honestly say that you feel that way for Mrs. Perez, and is there a possibility that you could be hindering both her and your ability to feel that way?”

One large hand ran down his face as he stroked the bristly hairs of his charcoal beard that highlighted his mocha-colored face.

“At one time, I did feel that way. However, now . . . I just feel empty inside. It’s more of a business arrangement than a marriage. I gave her all of me, and I don’t have anything else left to give.”

“Did you complete your assignment?”

He sighed and then rested his head in his palm, his elbow propped on the arm of the couch. “Of course,” he replied with a charming smile.

“I’m guessing Mrs. Perez didn’t?” I leaned forward and rested my arms on my desk. I knew when I gave the assignment that Bethany Perez wouldn’t participate. Yet, a part of me had hoped that, for her husband’s sake, she would.

As he stroked his beard, his glowing onyx eyes regarded me closely. “Doctor, again, you’re not a foolish woman. You knew she wouldn’t from the moment you gave her the assignment. What were you trying to prove?”

“Nothing. I honestly hoped, for your sake, Bethany would look beyond her feelings and give you what you needed, and vice versa. Now, you also knew she wouldn’t give her all to marriage counseling when you first started coming. Yet, you attended anyway.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

“The difference is that my wife started this and dragged me along.”

“What did you hope to get out of these sessions, Mr. Perez?” I needed him to come to certain conclusions about his marriage on his own, and I had to be careful not to lead him. This journey had to be as much a soul-searching endeavor as it was a search for healing.

Shrugging, he turned his lips downward. “I don’t know. I guess . . .” He sighed and appeared to become lost in thought.

I waited for him to gather his thoughts, attempting to ignore the velvety harmony of the amber and leather notes of his cologne intermingled with mint and what I guessed was blood mandarin. It was a scent that would arouse the pheromones in a woman. That was what happened every time I encountered him, and I had to battle my fleshly thoughts against the spiritual ones that told me to turn away from temptation.

“I wanted her to really see herself for who she is. I didn’t want to come initially because I thought it was a joke. I gave in because that’s how it is with Beth. She gets her way, and it’s expected that she will. Yet, when she persisted after the first and second visits, I hoped that maybe she might be willing to see herself for a change. I dared dream she would be up for the challenge of dealing with her flaws, not really changing . . .” His eyes rolled up to stare at the ceiling as if an errant thought had wandered up there. “No, more like recognizing herself for who she is and taking on self-responsibility. But she did what she always does.”

“What’s that?”

“Run. Beth always runs when she has to face the truth about herself.”

“And what is that truth, Mr. Perez?”

Clasping his hands together between his knees, he leaned forward slightly. Closing his eyes, he seemed to drift off in thought for what felt like a couple of minutes. I could tell that he did not want to bash his wife, and perhaps he, too, was struggling with the truth about who she was.

“She’s a narcissistic, manipulative, controlling, callous woman who lacks emotional intelligence. But she’s brilliant.”

Damn. I hadn’t expected that little rant.

“Brilliant. Is that what attracted you to your wife, Mr. Perez?”

He chuckled softly before sitting back on the couch again. “No, of course not. Not at first, anyway. My wife is a beautiful woman, Dr. Champagne. Beautiful in that good old American way. You know what I mean?”

I really didn’t. I had difficulty understanding why so many of my brothers were more attracted to a white woman than they were to their own sisters. The crap about them being intimidated by their female counterparts did not settle with me, nor did that piss-ass excuse about us giving our brothers hell and white women being subservient. No, I knew my black brothers were strong and not in the least intimidated by their black sisters. The issue was more convoluted than that, and it had its roots in the Willie Lynch letter.

African American people, especially women, had fallen for it hook, line, and sinker and had no clue. Oh yes, some of them thought they had a clue. Some of them had heard of it, but how many had taken the time to read it? And of that number,

how many truly understood the implications of it? And of those who understood, how many of them had analyzed their own lives and behaviors in conjunction with it and allowed the reversal of said thinking and behaviors to be enacted in their lives in such a way that they built the black nation strong or even starting within their own families?

“As long as you know what you mean, Mr. Perez, that’s what matters, right? Were you truly attracted to her for her beauty or for what you imagined she could do for you? Bethany Huffington-Bradwell was no stranger to most people, and surely, when you met her, you knew who she was. What were your true intentions when you became involved with her, Mr. Perez? Or marrying her?”

The worried expression that took over his face was unlike the usual confident and composed expression he displayed on a normal day.

“What are you saying, Dr. Champagne?”

“Mr. Perez, I’m merely suggesting that if you want to determine if your marriage is worth salvaging, you not only point the finger at your wife but assess your motives. Did you know who she was and her personality before marrying her? If so, and you chose to go forward anyway, then it sounds like you have vows to uphold.”

From the contemplative look on his face, I could tell that although he did not like my words, he knew they were true. Unlocking my iPad, I made a series of notes that would later be transferred to the file I kept on the Perezes. One of those notes included a reference to Dr. Amelia Childs. It was high time that I referred the couple to another counselor. One who wasn’t as prejudiced toward this case as I had become. Dr. Childs was in her mid-sixties, married for more than forty years, and as sweet as they came. For me, my feelings had become too involved for me to remain professional and unbiased.

Casimir

I pulled up in front of my three-story home in Cherokee Springs, Georgia, specifically in Cherokee Falls, the wealthiest part of the city. The home that I hated. It was nothing more than another showpiece for Beth, a talking point. It wasn't a home; it was a museum, as far as I was concerned. At just under 10.5 million dollars, the eleven-thousand-plus square-foot monstrosity was bought and paid for by her maternal grandfather as a wedding gift. Initially, I was mad as hell at the extravagant display of wealth. It felt like a pissing contest, as the men in her family wanted to show me what I could never give to her. Her father had already purchased her a custom Bentley that year.

But my father urged me to accept the truth for what it was, and the sooner that I did, the sooner I could just live my life and say fuck them. It was the rich man's symbolic gesture meant to convey what Kendrick Lamar said, "they not like us." And my family wasn't like theirs. No matter how much wealth we obtained, we would never be on their level.

Beth and I had experienced our first argument as a married couple about this house. I had wanted to get something that was more along the lines of what we could afford at the time. Something that I had purchased with my money and that did not include a guest house, an in-law suite, a formal and semi-formal garden, and not one but two in-ground Olympic-sized swimming pools and one indoor pool. Even now, with the position I held, I would not purchase something that costly.

We had no children who would leave toys strewn around and fill the bedrooms. There weren't any sounds of little feet running through the house and leaving handprints all over and spills for us to clean up.

A smirk tilted my lips when I thought about Beth's response to that point I made.

“Why would we have to clean their messes, Casimir?”

“Who else would do it, babe? Surely, you don’t expect our children to clean certain messes.”

“No, that’s what housekeepers and nannies are for.”

Laughing, I replied, “Look, I know you grew up in a certain manner, but my kids won’t have strangers raising them. That’s what they have two loving parents for.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

“Well, of course, it won’t be a stranger, Casimir. It would be a family member from one of our house servants who would take care of our family.”

“Beth, that’s our responsibility. Besides, that’s what makes a family—all the ups and downs and the challenging times. It’s what built my bond closer to my parents.”

Bethany made a scoffing noise and shook her head. “Casimir, there’s still so much you have to learn, sweetheart.” She gave me a quick peck on the lips and straightened my tie. I was getting ready to leave for work, but I wanted to slow up and have a sensual morning of lovemaking.

“Well, we might not agree on that, but I know we can agree on how we go about making those little people,” I said, grabbing her behind.

Beth reached around and smacked my hands. “What are you talking about, Casimir?” I hated it when she adopted the whiny voice.

“Girl, we’ll have lots of fun getting you pregnant.” Her face had grown pale as she jerked out of my hold. “What’s wrong, Beth?”

“How can I say this?” she pondered, pulling the belt on her silk red robe tighter. “I thought perhaps we could adopt or maybe hire a surrogate.”

“Why would we want to do that? What’s wrong, baby? Are you infertile?”

“Heavens, no!” she balked. “I just don’t understand why I would want to take my body through something of that nature. Look at me. My figure is perfect. I don’t want

any blemishes or imperfections. My hips are not made for carrying a child, and I cannot begin to imagine having stretch marks on them.”

I laughed at first because I thought she was playing.

“You’re silly.”

“No. I’m serious,” Bethany stated hotly.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I asked, staring at my wife as if she had grown two heads.

“What have I told you about that language, Casimir?” Beth chided.

“I’m not your child, Beth. If you want to boss someone around, I suggest you have kids, or better yet . . . call one of your house servants and get them to do that shit.”

I turned around, grabbed my keys, and stormed from the house.

That had been five years ago, and there were still no children. That remained a point of contention between us. She was starting to become interested in having one child, and I wanted a few children, but we could not agree on how to have them.

I thought it was an idiotic idea to hire someone to do something we could do perfectly fine on our own. If either of us had an issue procreating, then I would consider the option, but Bethany had drawn the line in the sand.

Sighing, I thought back to my meeting with Dr. Champagne. I had no idea what it was about her that made me want to share my true feelings the way that I had. Admitting those things about my wife had been troubling when I first said them, yet so freeing. Not once had I ever bashed Bethany or spoken down about her to anyone.

Instead, I was always the first to come to her defense, and only in private did I dare confront her about her behaviors. That was what a husband was supposed to do, right?

The confession about Bethany's behavior had only been the tip of the iceberg. Perhaps the more astonishing deviation from my typical behavior had been discussing love. Not once had I ever indicated to anyone that Bethany did not love me. Not even to myself would I admit it. Yet today, I had. Today, I longed for what I had known existed but something that I did not have.

I longed for something that eluded Beth and me, but I refused to acknowledge it. Today, my heart yearned for the love of a good woman, the love that would build me strong and recognize and acknowledge me for the man I was, not the one she thought I should be.

And then, not for the first time, I wondered what it would be like to come home to a woman like Dr. Champagne. A woman who made no apologies for who she was. Her intellect, her pride in her ethnicity, and her love of her culture as evidenced in the paintings hanging in the outer sanctum of her office. It also showed in the way she styled her beautiful hair, which was always twisted, braided, or in a natural afro when not pressed out.

Dr. Champagne wore beautiful African-inspired scarves boldly around her neck and other ethnic clothing. She was a woman who laughed when I shared my corny jokes rather than roll her eyes. Often, I would slip a joke in, here or there, simply to see Dr. Champagne's full lips turn up in a smile, revealing that slight overbite. The joy I received from that would be short-lived as soon as Beth spoke up and chided me for wasting the good doctor's time and making me look foolish in front of her.

I finally turned off the ignition and prepared to go into what was supposed to be my sanctuary. The only peace that I would find beyond those doors was if Bethany was

out. No matter where I was in the house, she would find me to nag me about something. It didn't matter if I was in my man cave or on the toilet; Beth would hunt me down to complain about something.

I had not bothered to pull around to the four-car garage. It would make for an easier and quicker escape if she were home. This way, I could simply run out of the front door, hop into the car, and find a place to get a brief reprieve from her nagging. And yet, if she were not home, as soon as she arrived, she would be nagging me about leaving my car parked out front like a common servant. I chuckled when I realized I no longer cared as much.

Casimir

I paced my office back and pulled my fingers through my meticulously groomed beard. With one hand in my trouser pocket and the other fingering the screen of my phone, I released a frustrated sigh. Bethany had sent me a text message about an event we needed to attend tonight. Another night of fake smiles, fake breasts, and fake people crowded into a room to determine whose bank account was bigger while everyone was trying to coax a favor out of someone else.

I hated these things even more than my father had. Yet, the difference was General Perez embraced the duties that were placed upon him; to me, it was an unnecessary requirement. More often, I found myself wondering how I had lost control of my life and how I could regain it. These thoughts had come more frequently when I started visiting Dr. Giselle Champagne. Several thoughts had popped into my head since my sessions with her. Thoughts I wouldn't have dared thought before.

Grimacing, I thought about the one thing I had withheld from the doctor. My marriage was an arrangement made by my father and Bethany's father. True, Bethany had been enamored with me upon meeting me, but the feeling had not been mutual. She was a beautiful woman, one I found myself attracted to, but she was

nothing more than a passing interest.

She was someone that I wouldn't have minded fucking and then going on about my business. She was someone who would have been forgettable had it not been for who she was. My mistake had been asking her out on a date, followed by another one a week later, all with the intention of fucking her.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

Upon learning of his daughter's feelings for me, Senator Bradwell hopped on the opportunity to take advantage of what he perceived as a winning situation. My father, an Army general, had also seen the advantage for himself in a union between the two families, and despite my mother, Judy's, warnings, my father had coerced me into fostering a relationship with the woman and convinced me that it would be to my advantage in the long run.

My father was a man whom I respected and admired. He was also a man whom I obeyed and never challenged or argued with my entire life. I had no need. I was always assured that my father had my best interest at heart, and he never led me astray. Even though he was a general, he was also my best friend growing up. With all the moving that we did, I was close to my father, and he understood it was hard for me to build life-long friendships until my teen years.

My journey to marrying Beth had been a swift one, dating for five months before becoming engaged and being married within ten months of my meeting her. The only advantage the marriage had brought to me was my bank account. Although I had not fallen in love with her initially, I had grown to love her over time. Unfortunately for me, that love had not been reciprocated.

Placing the ringing phone up to my ear, I stopped in front of the picture window behind my desk. Staring out into the park across the street, I found myself wishing for simpler times.

"Yes, Casimir." Bethany sounded annoyed.

I sighed. "I got your text. No, I won't be available tonight for the dinner." I held my

breath and prepared for the onslaught.

“What do you mean you won’t be available? You have no choice, Casimir. You owe me!”

Clenching my teeth, I balled my fist in my pocket. “I owe you nothing. You’re my wife. You owe honor to our vows. All I’ve ever asked for was your love, Beth. I’m not your damn do-boy.”

“Would you stop with that uneducated, lowbrow rhetoric that you use? This isn’t about love. I’ve given you my love on my terms, Casimir. You knew what this was when we said our vows, and you were okay with it.”

“You treat this marriage as nothing more than a business arrangement, Beth. And if that was how you felt, why would you even bother to force us to go to counseling? At first, I thought you did it because you really cared, because you wanted us to work, Beth. But you don’t.”

“I do care, Casimir. I do want us to work. I had hoped that by attending counseling, you would come to see the light and understand your role in this marriage and the importance of upholding a commitment that we made to one another and our fathers. Unfortunately, it seems as if you’ve become more aloof since attending counseling. Now, I don’t know what you think you’re planning to do tonight, but you had better be at that dinner, or you will have both of our fathers to answer to.”

“Bethany,” I growled, seething into the phone. “Bethany?” I repeated. Receiving no answer, I pulled the phone away from my face, only to find it was set to the home screen. She had hung up on me.

Swirling around in a circle, it took all my energy not to throw the phone at a wall and break it. This was what she did to me. This was how she left me feeling. She was no

good for me, and it was about time I did something about it. I had had enough of pleasing my father and enough of kissing her family's ass.

I had no desire to do anything else tonight, but I did not want to attend the dinner. It was another political function to raise money for an upcoming politician. It was all a joke. My presence wasn't necessary. Bethany had no problem writing a check, and she surely did not need me by her side to do it. No, it was always about image. That was all it boiled down to for her, her parents, and my father.

Fingering the phone again, I dialed another number. This time, I regained control of my emotions.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Ma."

"Casimir, hi, baby. How're you?"

I blew out a breath and walked around to the couch sitting across from my desk. Lying back on it, I propped my feet up on the armrest at the other end. Throwing one arm over my forehead, I spoke calmly into the phone.

"It's time, Ma."

"Casimir, baby, you know it's not that easy. You took vows, Casimir, for better or worse. Walking away from your marriage is not an option, unless, of course, it becomes physically abusive or volatile in some way. She hasn't resorted to that, now has she?" my mother asked in a strained voice.

Of course, she would suspect Bethany of abusive behavior before she ever suspected me. They had raised me to be patient, loving, kind, and a gentleman above all.

“No, Ma. I’d leave before I allowed it to go that far. I just need to bring it all to an end. I need to get my life back, Ma. Everything I ever did was to please Dad. If he’s not proud of me by now, I don’t know what to tell him. I have to become my own man and live my life according to what I believe and feel. The choices and decisions I’m about to make will upset him and place a strain on his and Rob’s relationship.”

“Oh, honey, you just leave your father to me. As for the great Senator, Kim will handle him. She was never fond of this arrangement and never had an issue vocalizing her opinions on it. Suits me just fine, anyway.”

“Why’s that, Ma?” I chuckled, knowing her answer.

“Bougie black folks are hard enough to stomach, but entitled white people? Now that’s another level entirely.”

I shared a laugh with my mother before growing quiet.

“What’s wrong, Son?”

“I could deal with everything, even the fact that she doesn’t really love me.”

“Oh, I think she loves you. I just think she loves you the only way she’s ever been taught to express it, which is by showering you with gifts. She gives you things and opens doors for you, and that’s how she expresses her love. Learning your heart, what makes you tick, and the things that you care about don’t occur to her because she’s never seen those values modeled in her life. Although your father and I have had our share of disputes throughout the years, we’ve always loved one another and never been afraid to express it.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

“Yeah, well, it’s not what I want.”

“But it is what you signed on for,” Mama reminded me.

“That’s true, but there are other things that I didn’t. Things that I don’t want to compromise on.”

“Like what, Son?”

I knew she picked up on the resignation in my tone. “I want children, Ma. I want to start a family.”

“So does she, or at least that’s what you’ve expressed to me in the past. Something’s changed?”

“Not really. Some things are better left unsaid. But now that everything’s about to fall apart at the seams, I might as well tell you. Beth never wanted kids; it was just something she said to everyone because it was expected of her. She finally agreed to start a family, but not the traditional way,” I said, sitting up.

“The traditional way?”

“She wants to hire a surrogate mother because she’s afraid of what bearing children might do to her body,” I explained dryly.

My mother did not respond with words. A simple sigh was all she would allow herself. I rubbed my hand down my face, and then I pulled my hand away to stare at

my wedding ring.

“I don’t know what I’ve done, Ma. But sometimes, it feels as if I’ve sold my soul to the devil.”

“Don’t you say that. Listen, I know that your heart is good. Perhaps if you work harder or really open up to her, maybe she’ll have a change of heart. I thought the two of you were going to counseling. What happened with that?”

I squeezed my eyes shut, willing away the image of Dr. Giselle Champagne and those sexy little suits and elegant African attire she wore. As was always the case, I felt myself growing excited at the mere thought of her.

“Well, when the tables turned on her, and she started having to answer for herself, you know she gave up. So, she hasn’t been going. I honestly don’t think it would have done us some good.”

“Casimir, maybe it would’ve, maybe it wouldn’t’ve. Who knows? What I’m concerned about is what this is going to do to your career. Will they keep you on at Glenco or find a way to terminate you? I just want to make sure that you’ve thought this all out in detail. You have a lot to lose leaving Bethany, Casimir.”

“And I’ve even more to lose if I stay, Ma,” I countered, standing up from the couch and walking back to the picture window. My sanity and independence weren’t all I would lose if I stayed in this marriage. I just might lose myself altogether.

Giselle

I closed the file I had been reading and opened another one. Before reading a single word, I removed my reading glasses and rubbed my eyes vigorously. I had not been getting much sleep lately. It seemed as if my sleep was peppered with dreams of

Elijah. And if it wasn't Elijah, then it was Bethany and Casimir.

I looked at the clock that hung over the bookshelf and noted it was five minutes until the next appointment with the Perezes. Part of me wished they would call and cancel. I was tired of the ongoing battle of will between the couple and me. Somehow, I had to regain control of these sessions and help them make some sort of progress once more. Otherwise, I could not explain charging them for a service that was not beneficial to them.

I called Dr. Amelia Childs to see if she could take the couple on, especially as a favor to me. Yet, my mentor and old friend had firmly stated she wasn't accepting any new clients. She was ready to scale back a bit as she prepared for retirement. She had given me a couple of references whom she thought would be the perfect fit for the couple, but I had not had a chance to follow up with them.

Today, I needed to get to the heart of the matter. What did they believe was the roadblock that hindered their progress to healing? I needed to determine if they would be willing to tackle that issue and how committed to the fight they were. There were some serious issues in their marriage, and I was certain they did not recognize all of them. There was something a bit off about their marriage, but I had yet to put a finger on it. That was unlike me.

The buzzing of my phone drew me out of my thoughts.

Grabbing the phone from its cradle, I whipped out a snappy, "Yes?"

"Your next appointment is here," Imani replied in a sing-song voice. "Positive energy," she whispered, obviously noting my dark mood.

Looking at the clock again, I realized I could no longer avoid the inevitable.

“Okay, send them in,” I replied with a sigh.

“Mm-hmm,” Imani replied. There was something in her tone of voice when she made that one sound that alerted me something was going on.

“Lord, please guide me and help me to understand what I’m supposed to give to this couple. Use me, Lord, to do Your will,” I whispered after hanging up the phone with Imani.

A light knock at the door helped me to compose myself as I forced a smile on my face and placed my reading glasses on before I stood.

“Good evening, Mr. Perez. Where is Mrs. Perez?” I asked as he closed the door behind himself.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

“She couldn’t make it again this evening,” he stated, walking to the couch and lowering himself onto it as if no further explanation was needed.

I hated the thrill of happiness that soared through me with his pronouncement. There was no way that I should be feeling this way nor basking in the warmth that floated through my body, knowing that I was about to be alone in my office with Casimir Perez again.

“Oh.” I walked back to my desk, sat down, and scribbled a couple of notes on a notepad. “She does realize that for this process to be successful, both of you need to be here, doesn’t she?”

Casimir’s eyes lowered to the floor before flicking back up to meet mine. Rubbing his hands together, he replied, “Yes, she knows. There was something important tonight that had to be taken care of.”

“More important than your marriage?” I challenged.

“I guess so, Dr. Champagne. I guess so.”

I noticed his tone sounded resigned, as if there were no other options.

“How do you feel about that, Mr. Perez?”

“Can we please dispense with the formalities, Doctor?”

“As in?”

“Can you please just call me Casimir? I’ll still reference you as Doctor if you prefer, but I’d like to leave all of that at the office. When I leave that place, I like to leave everything attached to it behind as well. And Mr. Perez is one of those things.”

“If that makes you more comfortable, we can do that. And just for the record, I don’t mind if you call me Giselle.”

He nodded his head and folded his hands together as if contemplating. I waited as he gathered his thoughts.

“I really don’t know how to feel about her making other things a priority over our marriage. I can’t really say that it bothers me because that’s how it’s always been, and that’s what’s expected. There are certain things in our circle that cannot be avoided. Things are the way they are, and I understood that when we first decided to marry. Do I like it?” He tossed his head from side to side as if weighing something on a scale.

“I don’t think I really care. Would I expect it in a normal marriage? No. I’d never tolerate it, but we don’t have a traditional marriage, Giselle. Perhaps, in the way they do in some countries, but not in the way I’ve been raised.”

“What do you consider a normal marriage, Casimir?” I was curious as to what he meant by traditional and normal. His comment had struck a note with me, causing me to wonder if that was the one thing that I had noted was different about their marriage.

I counseled couples who had open marriages, couples who married for business reasons, and couples who married for citizenship purposes. I couldn’t help but wonder which group the Perezes fell into. Surely not the latter.

“A marriage where two people commit their lives to one another to enhance each

other spiritually, psychologically, socially, and emotionally. A relationship that is built on trust, love, honor, respect, and commitment. A circle of unity where two people can grow together and develop strength through the good and the bad times, and that union is impenetrable. I believe a normal marriage is one where the husband does not dominate his wife, but he leads her and lovingly guides her. And she respects him and trusts him to do just that. He knows their strengths and weaknesses. He stands strong in the areas where his strength is best displayed, and he stands back and allows her to do the same in her area. They are one unit in Christ. Friends. Lovers. One eternal heartbeat.”

Unclasping his hands, Casimir sat back, crossed his ankle over his left knee, and splayed his arms across the back of the couch. When his eyes met mine, I saw something in them that shook me to the core and caused my heartbeat to speed up.

Lord, help me, I prayed silently.

“Why don’t you believe you have that type of marriage?” I prompted.

He chuckled. “I’d think even you’d know the answer to that by now, Doc,” he teased, a glint in his eye.

“It doesn’t matter what I think, Casimir. I’d like to know how you feel.”

Rubbing his hand over the top of his head, he replied softly, “We have an arranged marriage, Giselle.”

Taken aback, I struggled inwardly not to allow my composure to reflect outwardly. The way he said my name sounded so personal; it was like an intimate caress. But it was his statement that shook me to my core.

Arranged marriages weren’t an unusual phenomenon, but in my culture, they were

almost unheard of. How had a man like Casimir found himself in that situation?

Honestly, though he presented a polished, cultured professional when he attended sessions with his wife, it was the other side that he presented when she wasn't here that intrigued me. I knew that side was the real him. The side that spoke slang and was more relaxed. The side of him that acted up, laughed, and flirted.

"I'm surprised that you even expected love from your marriage since it was nothing more than an arrangement."

"Even the most cynical people need and want love, Giselle."

"Did you set certain expectations up front?"

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

Tilting his head at an angle, he replied, “Yes, we did. But they weren’t the ones you would expect. I guess what I’m saying is none of this has caught me by surprise. I just don’t want it anymore, Doc.”

There was a pleading look in his eyes, but I could not decipher what his silent question was. I was having difficulty discerning what my analytical mind was saying versus what my heart spoke.

“Have you had this discussion with Beth?”

“No. It’s not that simple to terminate a marriage like ours. A part of me hoped that she would come to an enlightened state of mind during these sessions, but I don’t see that happening. So, now I need to formulate a plan of how to bring this to an amicable end, not just between her and myself, but between our families. And that is the part that will be challenging, if not devastating. I guess that’s why I’m here today. Knowing that my wife would not be in attendance, I needed to have this private conversation with you.”

“Mr. Per . . . Casimir, may I remind you that I am a marriage counselor. It is my role to guide you in clarifying what the true issues are, how to implement resolutions in the marriage, and how to evaluate if your marriage is salvageable. I cannot assist in that without both of you here. There needs to be open and honest communication in the marriage between the two of you and a decisive attitude to move in one direction or the other.”

I stood and walked around my desk to sit in the chair beside the couch he occupied.

“Giselle.” I loved the way he said my name. It sounded so possessive and intimate, almost like the gentle caress of a lover’s hand. “The only thing my wife cares about is her image and that of her family. As I’m sure you’re aware, we’re in a political year. My father-in-law cannot afford to have a scandal attached to his name, no matter how distant. His seat in the senate is up, and everyone is rallying efforts around that cause to ensure that he does not lose his seat. As a matter of fact, they’re having a fundraising dinner tonight, where my father-in-law is the guest of honor, hence my wife’s absence by my side.”

Clasping my hands together, I leaned forward slightly. “And you did not think your presence would be important?”

“Oh, I’m certain that it’s important, but I could care less about politics. I’m fed up to here with politics,” he stated, raising his hand slightly above his head. “Politics in the family, in the workplace, in my marriage, hell, there’s politics in my bedroom.”

I held my poise, refusing to allow my discomfort at that comment to show. What was it about Casimir Perez that riled me up, challenging my normal, cool, calm, professional demeanor? Since when had intimate discussions about people’s sex lives ever caused me a moment of discomfort? I had heard some very raunchy and lascivious tales about couples’ sex lives, including some that ended in horror stories.

They had never bothered me in the past because I was a firm believer that everyone had their own choices to make. And if that included something kinky or on a new level, then more power to them. Who was I to judge what turned people on and allowed them to experience erotic pleasures? Yet, here was this man who made a mild comment about his sex life, and heat consumed my body.

“You have power over your relationship, too, Casimir. Everything is not exclusively under Bethany’s authority. You simply need to begin to wield a measure of that authority to invoke your rights in the marriage.”

“What are you suggesting, Giselle? That I take complete advantage of my wife against her will?” he asked, a mild smirk altering his features.

“Nothing of the sort, Casimir,” I countered, knowing he was trying to get me riled, but I wasn’t sure why. “You can implement certain restrictions and expectations in the marriage just as she has. Everything does not always have to go her way. Marriages, even arranged ones, are all about sacrifice and compromise. It seems that you’ve made several sacrifices; it would not be unfair to expect some compromise in return. Think about your initial attraction to Beth. What would it take to get you two back to that place, Casimir?”

Holding his head down for a moment, he seemed lost in the past, and I was content to allow him to remain there if he needed it. Finally, he looked up with a blaze burning brightly in his eyes.

“Nothing. We can never get back there.”

“Why not?”

“For the same reasons that I explained to you on a previous visit. I never had any desire to marry her in the beginning. In all honesty, she was someone I would have dated for a while, became sexually involved with, and eventually went on my way.”

“Using her essentially?”

“I wouldn’t put it that way.”

“What way would you put it?”

“I wanted her to satisfy my sexual needs, and she wanted someone to escort her to these dinners and social functions she was committed to. If anyone used anyone,

Giselle, I'd have to say we used each other. We could have chosen anyone to satisfy our needs, but it happened to be that we preferred one another."

"At what point did you decide you wanted to marry her?"

"I didn't. She decided she wanted to marry me, and once her father found out . . . well, baby girl gets whatever baby girl wants."

"Casimir, you had to be willing to go along with it. There was no gun held to your head, forcing you to marry her, I'm sure."

"A lot of coercion, and in the end, promises about what my future would look like if I committed to the plan. Her father wanted things from mine, and vice versa. It benefited the two fathers if we were to become married, and it benefited Beth. I thought that, in time, she would come to love me the way I needed and wanted her to. What we have isn't enough for me. I need . . . I want more. So much more, Giselle," he stated, pinning me down with his piercing gaze.

I squirmed uncomfortably in my chair. "Like?" Why had I asked that question? Was I inviting trouble?

"I need a woman who is fully committed to being my woman. Someone who can love me and accept the love I give and who's got my back the way I've got hers in every area. A woman who's open to exploring her sexual appetite and allowing herself to be explored and who desires me the way I desire her. She'll be all I need, Giselle."

I released a slight sigh that his words had gotten to me. I squirmed in my seat under his scrutiny. Yet, the way I was throbbing between my legs, I had no choice but to quell the deep sensation I was experiencing.

Casimir

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

My words were getting to her. I could tell the way she couldn't keep her ass still in her seat. And yet, I couldn't stop poking the bear. I wanted to get underneath Dr. Giselle Champagne's skin in a way that I had never desired to with another woman, not even my wife.

I wanted to see what the good doctor was like when she was riled up. I wanted to see how she reacted when she was angry, turned on, and fucking, out of control in bed. I glanced at those long, pink-tipped fingernails and wondered what they might look like with black satin sheets—my satin sheets—bunched in between them while I drove deep inside of her.

I wondered what she would sound like when I pushed the breath from her lungs and then slowly allowed them to fill up again. There was a mole at the bottom of her chin. I wanted to lick her there and feel her warm breath coating my face as she dropped her mouth open in a hiss or a moan.

“At what point in your marriage did you decide that was what you wanted from a wife, Casimir?”

“It wasn't at any particular point in my marriage. I always knew that was the type of woman I wanted.”

“And yet, you were willing to risk it all to have your wife.”

“Not to have my wife, but to honor my father's wishes. There's a distinct difference. For a long time, I believed that we would fall in love with each other. I grew to love her as a person, but she didn't reciprocate those feelings. I was never in love with my

wife because she didn't allow me to be. As you've seen, Beth has some hateful ways. She was more enamored with the ring on her hand and people calling her 'Missus' than she was with the marriage and her commitment to me."

"Mm . . ." She jotted something on the iPad that she kept at her side.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"What?"

She looked up at me with those big brown eyes, and curiosity gleamed from them.

"You said, mm. What does that mean?"

Giselle blinked rapidly and shook her head. "Nothing. I just noted that your perception of how she views the marriage has nothing to do with you."

"And that's how I feel," I stated with a shrug.

I placed my arms across the back of the couch and propped my ankle over my knee.

"I wonder how she views the marriage. Or maybe I should say, I wonder how she thinks you view the marriage."

"I wouldn't know."

"That's a problem, don't you think?"

"Why?"

"Maybe that's a conversation you should have with her. Let's make that your

homework assignment.”

“I think you like giving homework, Dr. Champagne.”

She lifted her eyebrows at me. “Doctor?”

“Just whenever you start acting like one. You don’t always act like that.”

“This isn’t about me, Casimir. It’s about you and Beth.”

“Do you seek therapy?”

“Excuse me?”

“For your problems. Who do you talk to?”

“Casimir, I think you’re losing focus of this session.”

“No, seriously. Who do you go to? You carry the weight of all your clients’ problems on your shoulders. You listen, you guide, you provide feedback, and you help us navigate the tumultuous storms of our lives. Yet, when you walk away from here, after watching people struggle with depression, sorrow, regret, confusion, and all the other human emotions we experience, how do you discard that weight? Who listens to you and comforts you? Who guides you and gives you peace? Who do you pour into so that your cup isn’t overflowing with the stress of others? Who comforts you when you’re feeling all alone, Giselle?”

Giselle’s eyes roamed the room and looked everywhere but at me. When they finally stopped, I noticed that she did so on my ring finger. For a while, she did not speak, but when she did, her voice was cracked and slightly broken.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

“Mr. Perez, I believe that’s our time for today. Please make an appointment on your way out.”

She stood dismissively and walked to her desk. I stood and nodded.

“First, answer my question.”

She inhaled and held it before she slowly released it. If I weren’t mistaken, I would have said that she was anxious.

“It’s my job.”

Her voice was cold and matter-of-fact, but her eyes held passion in them that she could not hide. She was throwing up a wall, and I respected that, for now.

“I’m sorry, Giselle. I didn’t mean to rile you up. I was just curious, that’s all. You need someone to worry about you too.”

She pressed her lips together in a tight smile and gave a perfunctory nod. I stepped out of her office, not wanting to push further than I already had. I knew that what I had done was wrong, but that hadn’t stopped me. I wanted to know those things. But even more than that, I wanted to be on her mind.

When I left the office, I hopped in my car on my way to my next appointment.

“Jude.”

“Hey?” My best friend’s voice boomed through the speakers loudly. I turned the volume on my speakers down just a little.

“My appointment ended earlier than I planned. I wanted to see if you were free to meet up with me now.”

“Yeah. Actually, I’m just finishing up with another client in the same building that I wanted to show you. Roll through. I honestly think this place might be your new home.”

“A’ight, bet. I’m only ten minutes out.”

“Cool. I’ll see you when you get here.”

I ended the call, turned the music up, and let down the top of my convertible Jaguar F-type. This car was the only thing that I had splurged on when I came into real money. The midnight blue car with its black interior was my dream car, and I took care of it in a way that I cared for little else in this life.

The appointment that I had scheduled with my best friend, Jude, was going to be the second thing that I splurged on, but I felt that it was worth it. I navigated the streets of Cherokee Springs’ largest medical complex until I made my way into Blossom Springs.

It was an upscale community in Cherokee Springs, but not quite as upscale as the area I currently lived in with my wife. Cherokee Falls was for the uber-rich. Although I enjoyed a certain lifestyle, I did not enjoy the obnoxious comments, snide looks, and suspicion that accompanied the greetings of anyone in my community who did not know me. Nor did I care for the assumptions people made that I finagled my way into the lives of Cherokee Falls’ wealthiest family when they learned that I was “thee Casimir Perez,” a man most people assumed was either white or Hispanic but

definitely not black.

It didn't matter that my father was Dominican. Thanks to his and my mother's dark skin, I had inherited a beautiful chocolate coloring. I looked like any other black man, although I often received comments that my eye coloring and my thick, curly hair signified that I was something more than just black.

Blossom Springs was more my speed. It was an upscale community in Cherokee Springs, but it was mostly comprised of people who looked like me. People who didn't judge or make presumptions because they were too busy working their asses off to maintain what they had in store for future generations. They had no time to worry about what the fuck Mr. and Mrs. Jones were doing next door or across the street. They weren't consumed with pretentious behaviors or the next country club outing. Not that they didn't have one, but it didn't dominate whether you were acceptable in that community based on whether you had a membership or not.

I pulled up to the building underneath the porte cochère, jumped out, and handed the valet my keys.

Jude stepped out of the building as soon as he saw me.

“Waddup, doe,” he greeted heartily and dapped me up.

“Shit, just stacking my paper, man.”

“Aye, boss man. You really finna do this shit?” he asked before he pulled the doors open again to the luxury building.

I glanced around and took in the elegant furnishings that comprised several seating areas and the oversized contemporary gas fireplace.

“Yeah, man.”

“All right, let’s do it. Here in the lobby, the reception desk is staffed all day and night. So, there’s always someone here to assist you whenever you need or to announce guests.”

“That’s what’s up. It’s time for a lifestyle change,” I declared as I looked around at the beautiful African American art installations.

“Hope this one doesn’t mean you’re about to cut me out of your life the way you did the homies.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

Jude was the only friend who I kept in touch with for a while after marrying Beth. She didn't know that I was still in touch with him. But there was no way that the first friend I made after my father retired and we moved to Cherokee Springs was about to be cut out of my life.

The rest of the homies, Malik, Jabari, Travis, and Nathaniel were wildin', but Jude was on some other shit. He had his mind on stacking his paper and building his career, not on hoing around and getting high. That was why I still rocked with him. He was the only one who didn't judge me for marrying Beth, either.

The rest of my boys were calling me a sell-out for marrying a white woman, but truthfully, any one of them would have jumped on that train if it meant being a part of the richest and most exclusive family in the state of Georgia. They would have willingly sold my ass down the river for a chance to be in my shoes. I guess, in some ways, I could be considered a sell-out, even if I did that shit for my father. This would be the first step to reclaiming who I was.

Jude pressed the elevator button and slid a keycard into a slot.

The first stop was the fitness center located on the second floor. It was spacious and took up an entire floor. The state-of-the-art fitness center offered high-tech cardio and strength training equipment. There was a glass-enclosed studio for personal training and group classes, and that was further divided into individual rooms, and a yoga and stretching lawn.

Our next stop was the Hub, located on the third floor. The entire floor was dedicated to business and offered private rooms to book for work and study, communal meeting

spaces, business lounges with seating clusters, an outdoor terrace, firepits, work desks, private conference rooms, phone booths, boardrooms, and a beverage bar with coffee, tea, and snack machines.

“You already know. The Vista is located in the most prestigious residential neighborhood of Blossom Springs. The swim deck has a resort-style pool, spa, poolside cabanas, pickleball court, a dog park, and a grand event lawn with seating features with views of the springs and downtown. There’s also a lounge and entertainment area with dining tables, a bar, an outdoor kitchen, and a cozy firepit,” Jude explained when we stepped off on the tenth floor and out of double doors that led to a rooftop.

The amenities area was just above the tree line and provided a sweeping panoramic view of the city. It was nice and provided everything that I could imagine.

“Damn, JR, this is sweet,” I replied, reverting to his nickname for Jude Rome.

“Wait until you see the rest of the building.”

Jude led me through the club area which was right off the amenity area, and it included a game room, a lounge, a bar, a kitchen for catering private events, and even a screening room to watch movies.

“You ready for the pièce de resistance?”

“Shiiid. That wasn’t it? Hell, a nigga like me could live in the amenities area and be all right,” I joked as we stepped back inside and took the elevator again.

“I told you. Only the best for my guy.”

“Yeah, yeah. Only the best price, too, I bet.”

He side-eyed me and then snickered.

“Just keep an open mind before I tell you the price.”

“I’m betting your ass ain’t gonna tell me until after I’ve seen everything.”

“You know how a nigga like me do it,” Jude replied and popped his collar.

I looked up at the numbers ticking off as we passed several floors.

“This is one of several penthouse suites that I’m showing you. They are in high demand, and there’s usually a waiting list for three years to get one. I happened to have connections and was able to swing this one your way before it was listed with other realtors.”

“Shit, what’s wrong with it? Is it haunted?”

“Nigga, nah,” he replied.

“Then what’s the deal? You fucking the owner or something?”

“Something like that.” He smirked.

“Oh, so she’s ready to dump this apartment off her hands, and you had the perfect target. Nigga, what it’s gon’ cost me?”

“Nah. Not like that. I’m talking about the woman who owns the building.”

“Oh, damn. You fucking prime pussy. I thought the woman who owned this building was Gretchen Harrel.”

“It is.”

“Nigga, she’s fifty-two years old. Damn!”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

He stepped off the elevator on the twentieth floor, leaving me standing back there with my jaw dropped.

“You coming, or you gonna catch a mouthful of flies for the residents of The Vista?”

I quickly followed him into the marble foyer. We stepped inside to wenge hardwood flooring, crystal chandeliers, sweeping panoramic views with natural light, soaring twelve-foot ceilings, floor-to-ceiling windows, private terraces off the living room, and the master suite. Aside from the master suite, there were two guest bedrooms, both with a private bathroom, a den, a half bath, a kitchen, a living room, a dining area, and a great room. Every bedroom had a walk-in closet.

“These residences are set at the corner of the tower to give the best view possible in thirty-six-hundred square feet of space. You’ve checked it out from end to end, including the high-end kitchen. Tell me what you think?”

“Man. I gotta sign in blood for this?” I asked, looking around at the magnificent penthouse.

He chuckled. “Four and a quarter.”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

“Nope. But she’s willing to let it go for my best friend for three and a quarter.” That was six and a half million less than our home cost. It was steep but definitely worth my peace of mind.

I whistled. “That’s a steal.”

“Damn right, it is.”

“Still. I need time to sleep on it.”

“You do that, but don’t sleep too long, pah’na.”

“Forty-eight hours?”

“Yeah. That’s cool. In the meantime, watch your back. You know you’re in deep with that posse of yours.”

“Man, don’t I know it.”

We dapped it up before I headed out. I had a lot of things to think about.

Giselle

I slid one cotton-candy-colored toenail from underneath the bubbles. Just one that I wiggled ever so slightly. Slowly, I allowed the other four to slide up the smooth walls of the Roman tub. Turning the jets off, I slid down slightly and allowed the heat from the water to soothe my aching muscles.

My muscles were sore from the hour and a half workout I had done after leaving the office, trying to chase away my demons. The workout had not helped, so I grabbed a bottle of wine and some Indian cuisine on the way home.

The bottle of wine that I had mostly consumed, and even carried to the bathroom with me, was calling my name again. I knew that I would pay for it tomorrow, but I didn’t care. After all, the office was closed on Fridays, and I could sleep in and then catch

up on my administrative workload in the afternoon.

It would be so easy to succumb to my thoughts. The guilt and the shame that had stretched its tentacles toward me throughout the day, which I had pushed to the recesses of the darkness, now grabbed at me. I had no strength to fight it. Tears drenched my face as I reached up and pulled the tightly coiled twists down and allowed them to drape around my shoulders and become soaked by the water and bubbles.

I gripped the edges of the tub with my nails. After several seconds, I pulled them away and covered my face with my hands. The sobs shook my body as I screamed in the confines of my bathroom. "I'm so soooorry!" I cried out.

Grief could be an unpredictable enemy. It crept upon you in the most unexpected ways, clutching you and rendering you weak. You would question your sanity if you could withstand the power of its grip. Sometimes, you would have to find the strength you did not know you had to rise and gasp for air. Often, the power it held over you made you feel as if you could not breathe. That was my battle at that moment.

The intrusive ringing of the phone, like a nosy neighbor ringing the doorbell, poured through the speakers of my bathroom. Someone had dared peek into my bedroom and assumed I was having a personal pity party. Someone had dared to want to enter my dungeon and intrude upon such a private and intimate time. Who that uninvited guest was, I had no idea, nor did I care.

I picked up the picture frame that I had laid on the chair beside the tub upon stepping in. My fingers trailed a loving path over the features that were etched into my brain, the ones I felt I had spent a lifetime loving. I thought my love could save Elijah.

We had known one another since college and had been close friends, dating off and on. It wasn't until twenty-four that we began a committed relationship, marrying four

years later at twenty-eight. Yet, all the love I poured into our relationship and his heart had not been enough to save him from the darkness of depression.

In the end, he had taken his life behind the precinct in his car at the end of his shift. He had cuddled up in the rear of the dark parking lot and made a lasting memory with his service revolver just as his captain stepped out of his car.

I stood up and set the picture back down on the chair. Grabbing my towel, I wrapped it around myself before picking the picture up again and heading into my bedroom. Not bothering to dry or oil my body, my normal routine, I lay on the bed and curled into a ball.

Wretched sobs were pulled from deep within as I cried out to the love of my life.

“Why, Elijah? Why’d you leave me?”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

Tonight was not the first time I wished I could turn back the hands of time. What could I have done differently to change the way things were? What could I have said that would have given him the strength to hold on? Didn't he know suicide was a sin? Yes, he knew. We'd talked often about the Bible. What could have been so bad that he couldn't fight for his life?

"Elijah, baby, I need you so bad," I cried. "Please, please, baby, come back." I whimpered, tears running from my eyes, intermingling with the snot that dripped from my nose.

My phone rang again, and when I looked at it, I saw that it was my big sister, Genevieve, whom I called Genni. I knew that if I didn't answer the phone, she would only call again, and if I still failed to answer, she would wait for an hour and call again. In between the calls, I would get a dozen text messages. If she still didn't receive a response, she would pop up and use her key to enter my townhome.

"Hey, Genni."

"Gigi. What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I lied.

"Don't lie to me. I hear it in your voice. You've been crying."

I squeezed my eyes and lips shut tight. I tried to hold the pain inside, but it was making my chest ache.

“Oh, sweetie. It’s Elijah, isn’t it? You’re missing him,” she stated softly.

Her compassionate voice broke the damn, and I cried endlessly for several minutes as she just let me cry. She didn’t try to make it better or tell me that everything would be all right. She just let me get it all out.

I finally stopped.

“You want to talk?”

“I don’t know, Genni. It’s just so hard. I think back on the advice Raegan and Eriss and a long line of other well-meaning friends and relatives have given me, and I want to curse them.”

“Why, baby girl?”

“They all said that wounds heal with time. Well, they lied.”

“Maybe they didn’t, baby girl.”

“How would they know? Not one of them has ever walked a step in my shoes. Not one of them has ever lost a love like mine. Not one of them has had the love of their lives to commit suicide. Do they understand how it feels to know that your love wasn’t enough to keep a person here on this earth? That they didn’t love you enough to stick around to fight the battle with you? Of course, they don’t.” I sobbed.

“You’re right. No one knows your pain except for you. And even if they had gone through something like that, it still wouldn’t be the same. Your relationship with Elijah was unique to you and him. There is not another Elijah, just as there isn’t another Giselle. What you two had could never be replicated, so it’s impossible for them to feel your pain.

“But I will tell you this. It may not happen today, tomorrow, next week, or even next year. But they’re right. In time, that wound will heal. Will it go away completely? Probably not. There will always be a bitter sting when you’re wondering what you could have done differently and what you missed. But it will heal. I’m sorry it hasn’t happened as soon as you would like, but it will happen, sweetie.”

“Genni, they keep telling me to hold on. Well, now it falls on deaf ears. They have no clue of my pain and the difficulty I experience letting go of a love that ended a while ago. A love that will never be returned, no matter how much I give of my love and myself.

“Never will I hear the deep, throaty laughter he emitted at one of my corny jokes, nor see the smile that always seemed to be hiding some elusive secret I could not get to. There won’t be any more making love at two and three o’clock in the morning when he woke feeling horny and pulled me close to him. You know what I miss the most, though, Genni?”

“What’s that?”

“His soothing, deep voice encouraging me over the phone when I was having a particularly rough day with my clients. For so long, I have just yearned to hear his voice one more time. Even in my efforts to replay the final phone call in my head fifteen minutes before he pulled the trigger, ending his life, his voice was not the same. Not exactly.”

“Listen. Nobody can feel your pain, honey. And I won’t try to tell you to ignore it. Embrace the pain, let it work its course, even if it has to take the long circuitous route, if that’s what you need to do.”

“I’ve done that the last five years.”

“Well, then only you will know when it has wrung you dry. And when it has, put that bitch in its place, and tell her that it’s time to let you live again, breathe again, and quite possibly love again.”

My sister’s voice turned into a whisper on the final phrase, “Love again.” She understood how I believed that, though it was possible, it wasn’t something I wanted. I was afraid of losing someone again. This hurt too much.

Now, coupled with my grief, I had to deal with this new guilt. I felt as if I had betrayed Elijah’s memory by lustinafter another man, especially one who was married. No man had occupied any space in my head, since the passing of my precious husband, and long before that. Now it seemed as if Casimir crept into my thoughts more and more, and Elijah wasn’t having it. He had come back with full force today in my thoughts, my memories, and even just being more aware of his pictures around the house this evening. I knew that was because of how heavily Casimir had been on my mind. That was the only explanation for why I was missing Elijah so desperately.

“You’re right, Genni.”

“You did a lot of things rapidly, hoping to move past the pain, and I doubt you ever allowed yourself to feel your grief in the beginning. I know that you have the last few years, but it took you a year to get there. You were too scared of it sinking its tentacles into you. Too scared of becoming depressed.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

I heard what she didn't say. Like him. I sniffled and grabbed tissues from my nightstand to clean my face.

"I feared letting go. I was so scared of losing my sanity, and I needed to be here for my clients. So, I pushed my feelings aside in the beginning."

"And you only hurt yourself in the end."

"You're right."

We sat in silence for a while before I spoke again. "At one point this evening, I thought I smelled the scent of his cologne, but I knew that had to be a figment of my imagination."

Like his clothes, I had removed all his other belongings from the home we had shared and donated everything. I had brought nothing with me to the townhouse I had purchased in River Oaks, other than his pictures and a couple of memorabilia from his college days.

"You want me to come over and spend the night with you, sweetie?"

"No. I'll be fine. Thanks for being here for me."

"That's what sisters are for."

"You called me. I'm so sorry. Did you need anything?"

“No. You were just on my mind,” Genevieve stated.

She did a daily call to check on my parents and me, but she had already done her daily check-in earlier.

“You checked in on me earlier, though.”

“Yeah, and your voice sounded slightly off. Not much, but I just wanted to see about you. I’m glad that I did.”

“So am I, Genni. Good night. Love you, star,” I stated, calling her by the nickname I’d given her as a kid.

“Nite-Nite, moon. I love you too.”

We ended the call, and I rolled over onto my side. Looking down at my hand, I stared at my wedding band. I only wore it when I was missing him more than normal. I had put it back on my finger when I returned home this evening. In the early days after his death, it had been difficult to comprehend that my love for him had not been enough to pull him through.

Swiping at the tears in my eyes, I sat up, walked back to the bathroom, and grabbed the bottle of wine. Turning it up, I allowed the sweet but dry red wine to coat my throat.

It was time for me to move forward, I knew, but it wasn’t a decision I had come to easily. It was a shame that a married man had been the one who unknowingly helped me realize that. I could not have Casimir, but seeing his misery trapped in a life that was a lie made me understand that you only had one life, and you had to live it to the fullest.

When Elijah died, I had stopped living too. His passing had crushed me, making me believe that I would never love again. I really didn't think my heart could ever take another loss like that one. Five years later, I knew there was nothing wrong with dating again. I just wouldn't give my heart away.

"Sooo, he's a doctor like you and—"

"Raegan. Come on. I just said I was considering it. I don't need you to set me up with anyone. I can get a man on my own," I declared to one of my best friends.

My decision to live life had led to me kicking my work aside the next day and having lunch with my best friends, Raegan Meadows and Eriss Merrill. We were at Eriss's home.

"Oowhoo!" Raegan and Eriss squealed.

"Stop, you two!" I said, waving my hands at them. We were all laying out around Eriss's pool in lounge chairs, soaking up the sun.

"I, for one, am glad you decided to return to the land of the living. No pun intended!" Raegan said, wiggling her eyebrows just above her shades.

"Raegan," Eriss chided. "Really?"

"Whaaat?" Raegan cried out, sitting up on her chair and holding her arms out at her sides.

Raegan was the friend that said the shit that everyone felt but had too much grace and tact to say. Raegan didn't really possess a filter for that reckless mouth of hers.

I shook my head and waved Raegan off. "It's okay, Eriss. You know she doesn't

know any better. Besides, I really am ready to get back to doing something other than working day in and day out,” I confided.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

“What brought about this change is what I want to know?” Eriss asked, turning sideways in her lounge, crossing one thigh over the other with a cheeky grin.

“Weeeell . . . I just came to my senses, is all.”

I knew if I shared the attraction to Casimir, my friends would never let me live that down. Not to mention, he was married and my client, a double taboo.

“Okay, Miss Psychologist. I know you’re great and all, but spill the beans. What made you have a change of heart? We’ve spent the last five years trying to pull you back into the world, and you’ve resisted every effort that Raegan and I have made. I just want to know who brought about the sudden change. What’s his name? And please don’t spill some psychological mumbo jumbo to me,” Eriss warned, wagging a finger at me.

I released a heavy sigh. “There’s nothing to tell, Eriss. I just sat down and had a heart-to-heart with myself. Listening to my clients all day, I realized I really don’t have serious problems, and I must stop being afraid to live. So, yes . . . I want to date again.”

“I’m so proud of you, Giselle. It takes a lot of courage to make this decision and step back into the dating world again. Who knows? Your Mr. Right might be just waiting in the wings.”

“No, Eriss. I’m not a character in one of the romance books you read. I simply want to enjoy my life. That’s all,” I affirmed.

“Girl, I know a thing or two about that. Besides, who has time to settle down with some joker who’s only out for one thing anyway? Here you are, being faithful to him, and he’s out doing your girl and everyone else that spreads for him. No, ma’am, . . . keep ’em closed, have fun, and just do you. That’s my motto, Eriss.” Raegan chimed in, holding her Margarita up in the air as if she were toasting someone.

Eriss rolled her eyes. “That would be your motto. How does Gavin feel about that, Mrs. Meadows?”

Raegan smirked, tossed her drink down her throat, and collapsed against the lounge chair, closing her eyes.

“That’s what I thought,” Eriss concluded, turning back to me.

I shook my head and giggled at my best friends. “Seriously, Eriss. I’m not thinking about love. My heart can’t take it. Right now, I just want to get out and live again. Do a little socializing. I’m not thinking about marriage, serious relationships, or even sex for that matter, just—”

“Now, wait a second!” Raegan shouted, sitting back up and pushing her rose-colored sunglasses on top of her head. “That’s your problem, girl. You need some sexual healing. Just a little something to clean out those cobwebs, and you’ll be all right again. You know . . . find a chimney sweeper,” she said, holding her arms above her head and working her hips side-to-side.

Eriss grabbed a pillow from behind her and tossed it at Raegan.

“Hey, you know I’m telling the truth,” Raegan declared.

“She can’t be out there with guys like that. She needs one man to come and love and take care of her,” Eriss disputed.

“Hey, I didn’t say she had to be with several guys. She just needs one good one to sweep her chimney. What do you think keeps me faithfully committed to my husband? Not just love, but that pipe he’s laying down every night.”

“Every night, Raegan?” I asked, twisting my lips.

“Damn near.”

“Okay, what about that time of the month?”

“Honey, it’s all about him then. I grab that microphone, blow into it, and make him sing like James Brown.”

Raegan jumped up from her chair, swiveled her hips, and dropped to one knee. “He be up in there singing ‘Baby, please don’t go. I love you soooo,’” she crooned in her soprano voice.

I hollered with laughter. I laughed so hard tears fell from my eyes, and Eriss joined in too.

When we finished laughing, I looked at my friends. “Seriously, girls, I just want some time to get out and have some fun and do me. No restrictions, no regulations. Just me. That’s all I need right now. When it’s time for more, I’ll move forward another step.”

“The doctor has spoken and prescribed her remedy. I will not interfere,” Raegan proclaimed, holding up a hand in a declaration of oath, with the other on her heart.

“Thank you, Raegan,” I stated, smiling at my old friend. We turned to Eriss.

“I just really want you to find love and happiness again, sweetie. You were meant to be a wife. You were so amazing in your relationship with Elijah. I always admired

what you two had,” Eriss stated.

“Yeah, well, everything wasn’t so perfect now, was it?” I asked in a soft voice. I tilted my head back and willed the tears to remain in check.

Eriss reached out and grabbed my hand. “I’m sorry, sweetie. You’re right. I will leave well enough alone and trust you to manage your life.” She pressed her lips into a tight smile and squeezed my hand tightly.

“Thank you,” I whispered, choking down the emotions that threatened to overwhelm me.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

“Now that we’ve got that out of the way,” Raegan remarked, “where are we going for our next girl’s night out?”

“I’d like to go rock climbing or maybe canoeing,” I suggested.

“Yeah, we haven’t done an adventure outing in some time,” Eriss agreed.

“Then maybe we can top it off with dinner at Soldier’s,” Raegan proposed.

“The new African restaurant on the west side?” I asked.

“Exactly. Gavin and I went there one night and not only is the atmosphere amazing, but the food is to die for. I’ve been wanting to go back, but with his busy schedule, we just haven’t had time,” Raegan replied.

“Sounds like a plan to me. Let’s shoot for next weekend,” Eriss suggested.

I pulled up my phone and scrolled to my calendar. “It’s a date.”

“Can you get away from Aydan’s fierce loving long enough?” Raegan teased.

Eriss waved her hand. “Actually, he’ll be at a conference for the magazine next weekend. He wanted me to go along, but I decided to skip this one. Speaking of my baby’s fierce loving, I don’t think we’ve got anything on you and Gavin, Ms. Once a Day.”

Eriss and I giggled at Raegan’s stricken expression. “Well, I’m a high-maintenance

woman, and I have needs too. Gavin knew what he was getting into after chasing me down. I'm not an easy one, I know, but I'm necessary," she said, winking at us as she pulled her sunglasses back down on her face.

I lay back on the lounge and closed my eyes. I reflected on our conversation. I had been lying when I told them I did not want a relationship. There was nothing I wanted more than to be married again, but I was certain I could not handle it. Not now at this stage of my life.

Losing Elijah had been too much for me to handle. If I were to be honest, I wasn't sure how I would handle dating again. It had been far too long since I had played the games, and I doubted if I had the patience or energy to do it again.

Yet, when I looked at what Eriss and Aydan had, my heart jumped for joy at the possibility of once again sharing a love and commitment so deep. When I looked at what Raegan and Gavin had, I was mesmerized by the possibility of a man so protective and nurturing toward me the way Gavin was with Raegan.

I wasn't certain what it was, but I prayed they would work their way through it. After all, the two couples were the only reason I held onto the little bit of hope that I did. The couples coming into my office weekly didn't give me much reason to hope. Especially not Casimir and Bethany Perez.

Casimir

Frustration filled me as I pulled into the medical complex for our counseling session. Beth and I argued on the way over. It was nothing abnormal, but it did hamper my mood.

"Go ahead into the office. I'll be there shortly. I have an urgent call to make."

“It can’t wait, Beth?”

“No, Cas. It cannot. It’s related to Daddy’s fundraising campaign.”

I blew out a breath and exited the car, but not without slamming the door closed behind me. She pissed me off every chance she got.

I shot off a text message to someone.

Me:I need those phone records.

TC:This afternoon.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Perez. Please sign in, and Dr. Champagne will be right with you.” The receptionist greeted me as I stepped inside.

I signed in and took a seat. I busied myself with reviewing emails on my phone related to the other business I started a few years ago. I hadn’t mentioned it to Bethany, her parents, or mine yet. Only those who needed to know knew about it.

“Mr. Perez, I’m ready for you.” The silky-smooth voice of Giselle Champagne called to me a few minutes later. I checked my watch and noticed that ten minutes had passed since I left Bethany in the car.

“Is Mrs. Perez not joining us again today?” Giselle asked as I walked into her office.

The spicy floral fragrance she wore tickled my nose and tugged at my manhood.

“She’s outside making a phone call. She should be in shortly.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

Giselle's smile faltered briefly, and her shoulders slumped before she nodded and closed the door behind her. Could I have imagined her disappointment? Did she enjoy our solo meetings as much as I did? I tempered my excitement, because I knew that soon Bethany would be in here with us, and she would bring her negative energy with her.

She took her seat in the armchair beside the couch, and I made sure to scoot to the other side of the couch so that I could be closer to her.

"Did you do your homework?"

I nodded. "I did. Well, as much as I could."

"What does that mean?"

"It simply means that I tried to have the conversation, but it only got so far before my wife decided that she wasn't interested."

"Casimir, what is it that you believe is holding you and your wife back from making any type of progress?"

I sighed. "She doesn't want a traditional marriage. Beth wants the freedom to live her life without restrictions and not having to answer to anyone. I want a wife."

"Does she know what that means to you?"

"She does. We had an in-depth conversation about our expectations before we

married, and we both agreed to the other's views. We made some changes to make sure that our goals aligned. Or at least we did verbally. But that's about as far as those changes went. A conversation."

"Have you shared with her how that makes you feel?"

"I have."

"And what does she say?"

"Let's just say that I think you would fit the view of a wife that I have better than my wife does or would be willing to."

She angled her head in a peculiar manner. Then she shook it and stated, "Let's not do that."

"I'm simply being honest."

She sighed dramatically. "I have to be an unbiased facilitator in this process. My personal feelings, thoughts, and life decisions have no place in these sessions, Mr. Perez. Is that understood?"

"I understand. But it doesn't change my perspective."

She leaned forward a little, and my eyes swept down to her cleavage. Realizing her mistake, she instantly sat up and tugged the cowl neckline of her taupe-colored fitted dress back up.

"Here's what I have to offer. My services as your marriage counselor or recommendations for another provider who you can maintain strict professional boundaries with, Mr. Perez."

“I really wish you would call me Casimir.”

“And I really wish you would respect the professional boundaries.”

“I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure that you don’t refer me to another professional.”

“Not just you, but Mrs. Perez as well.”

I nodded and sat back in my seat just as the door swung open. Bethany’s cheeks were red, and her eyes were bright.

“So, what did I miss?” she asked and clapped her hands together.

“We were discussing the homework that I gave Mr. Perez on his last visit.”

“Oh, the unauthorized visit?” Bethany stated and glared at me.

Giselle’s eyes swung back and forth between my wife and me, but she didn’t say anything.

“I explained to Dr. Champagne that I attempted to have a conversation with you regarding how you thought I saw our marriage.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

“Are we seriously back on that conversation again? You view this marriage as a dumping ground for your problems. You think that I’m supposed to be your servant and baby-maker. I have a life outside of the home, but you don’t seem to respect it.”

“Mrs. Perez, do you honestly believe that your husband only sees you as a homemaker?”

“I know that he does. He doesn’t respect my career. He believes that the work I do for my father’s campaign is just because I’m his daughter.”

“That’s not true, Beth. You know that I respect your intellect, the work that you do, and the name and reputation you’ve built for yourself. I just want you to put that same energy into creating a home for the two of us.”

“Why should I have to cook and clean when we have a house staff to manage those things?”

“It would be nice to have a homecooked meal from my wife every now and then. And it would also be nice to have children that my wife and I created. And I’m not talking about one created in a lab or one that another woman would carry.”

Bethany scoffed and shook her head at me.

“Casimir, this is not the place for these discussions. This is the ridiculous behavior that I refuse to entertain, Dr. Champagne.”

“Let’s back up for one moment, Mrs. Perez. Do you recall how important it was for

him to respect your career?”

“I do.”

“Then let’s try to give him the same consideration as it relates to the things that he wants. Now, that’s not to say that your concerns aren’t valid,” Giselle stated as she held up a finger to Bethany, who was ready to cut her off based on the way she was turning red. “Mr. Perez, Bethany’s decision to procreate or not should be decided between the two of you, but you also must respect her feelings about her choice when it comes to her body. That is her choice.”

“And she’s my wife,” I growled.

“That may be true, but that doesn’t mean that she lays down all of her rights when it comes to you.”

Beth shot me a smirk and crossed her arms. “Thank goodness someone has some sense.”

“Although, I do want you to consider your husband’s feelings. Think about how he might feel about another woman experiencing what he wants to experience with you. He wants a child, and you’re not opposed to it. But he wants to be there every step of the way, seeing his child grow in your womb, feeling her move for the first time, seeing every change that happens to your body as this occurs.”

“And that’s what I don’t want!” Beth shouted.

“Calm down, Mrs. Perez. No one is taking away your rights. I simply asked you to consider—”

“You know, Dr. Champagne, I’m sure you mean well, but these sessions are not

really helping my husband and myself. I expected a therapeutic experience and some healing and growth when this was all over with. But I honestly believe that these counseling sessions of yours have made our marriage worse. My husband has these delusions that I am supposed to change when he is the one that's changing. I have been the same woman that he met until this day. Prior to these sessions, he was a content man, but now he's dissatisfied, as though he wants something more. Something about my husband has changed, Dr. Champagne, and I believe it is connected to these sessions. Especially after speaking with Mother, she thought maybe I—"

"Your mother?" I asked, leaning back and mugging the shit out of Beth. "I thought we signed an agreement stating that everything in these sessions would remain between you, me, and Dr. Champagne. What was the use of all of that if you weren't going to follow through? As a matter of fact, have you followed through on any of your promises? Maybe that's why we can't get this thing to work."

"This thing? This thing, Casimir? This thing is our marriage! Or does it not mean anything to you anymore?"

"It means everything to me. But obviously not to you, seeing how you were the one that bailed on these sessions. I wasn't the one who wanted to start coming here in the first place, Bethany. Or did you forget that too? It was you who dragged me here. Just so Ms. Champagne could become another member of your audience you enjoy bashing me in front of."

Beth stood from the couch, crossed her arms, and looked down at me. "You know, you people are all just alike, aren't you?"

I wanted to knock the fuck out of her. She'd said things like that before. I knew that my wife was prejudiced, although she didn't believe that about herself. But I never in a million years thought she would embarrass me or herself by saying shit like that so

publicly. What happened behind closed doors was one thing, but having a witness to her ignorant behavior was another thing.

Anger rose within me, and I closed my hands into tight fists. My jaw clenched because I was seconds off calling her a bitch. I didn't want to disrespect my wife that way, but I was sick of her disrespect.

Dr. Champagne stood from her chair and moved between the two of us.

“Mrs. Perez, tensions can run high, and things can become volatile in times of pressure and strain in a marriage. The two of you are under a lot of pressure right now, having differing opinions on the way you want to live your life and the way you want to be viewed by others. When cultural differences come into play—”

I didn't want her trying to smooth shit over, not after she had been insulted. Dr. Giselle Champagne was a queen and deserved to be treated as such. Even in the face of my wife's insolence, she still held her poise. She was to be commended, and I wouldn't allow her to be insulted further. I knew that was the path that Beth was on.

“Dr. Champagne, while I appreciate your magnanimous attempt to soften the impact of my wife's deplorable words and insolent behavior throughout this session, I think it's time that my wife and I leave. We have greater problems than we realized,” I stated in a quiet voice.

Beth rolled her eyes and then said to Giselle, “We will not be returning for your services. Please send the final invoice, and we will pay it. Perhaps our time slot will be more useful to some poor couple who believes they need your services.”

I stood and grabbed Beth by her wrist, and she jerked away from me. To keep from smacking the shit out of her, because I wasn't that man, but she was pushing my limits, I placed my hand on her lower back and ushered her toward the door. Bethany

reached back and removed my hand as she scowled at me.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

“Mr. Perez, if I may suggest something,” Giselle stated.

I stopped, but I couldn’t look into her eyes. My need to protect her in the moment superseded my need to protect my wife. I didn’t want Giselle to see the longing I had for her in my eyes.

“Mr. Perez, please,” she pleaded.

I turned back to look at Giselle, and she stared me in the eye.

“I cannot tell you how to run your marriage. But I can suggest that perhaps you may want to be careful how you conduct yourself, Black king, in volatile times.”

I nodded, and Beth glared at us, squared her shoulders, and walked out of the door. I left knowing that if I stayed in Giselle’s presence, I would do something I might regret.

“I want a divorce,” I declared as I unlocked the car doors.

“Cas, please,” Beth started when we got in the car and rested her hand on my wrist.

I jerked away from her touch, started the car, and floored it out of the parking lot.

“Don’t say a muthafuckin word to me,” I growled.

Beth turned in her seat away from me and busied herself on her phone. There was no doubt about it. I would do what I needed to do. I had two very important phone calls

to make when I returned home.

Casimir

Two Weeks Later

Sitting in my dark office all alone, I listened as the sound of clicking heels on the teak floors drew closer to my inner sanctum. I picked up the shot glass of whiskey and downed the remainder of the drink to calm my nerves.

I loved peace, yet I had somehow lost that in this marriage. It seemed as if I was carrying negative energy with me as often as my wife did these days. Peace was a foreign entity for me, an elusive stranger.

The steps slowed down just outside my door. The lights in my office were turned off. The only lights were from the full moon outside of my window and the lights that lit up the front yard.

Five years of my life had come down to this. She was probably hoping I was upstairs asleep. I should have been, but then again, she should have been home at one thirty in the morning. I had no idea where my wife had been, and the sad part about it was that I did not care.

Standing from behind my desk, I pushed my chair back and walked to the door, opening it just as she began to ascend the stairs a few feet beyond my doorway.

“Beth.”

She froze on the stairwell, shoes in her hand, caught mid-creep. “I thought you would be asleep.”

“I’ve been up waiting for you,” I stated in a resigned tone.

“Casimir, it’s late. Can we wait until the morning to do this?”

“There’s nothing I want to do, Beth. I just want to talk to my wife. Something I need to share.”

She turned around, facing me for the first time. I could see the puzzled look on her face as she stared back at me. Looking at her watch, she glanced back at me. “Really, Casimir? Can’t it wait until the morning?”

“I’ve waited for you for the last two weeks, and every time, there’s something else.”

Beth and I slept in separate bedrooms. She was usually asleep when I left in the morning, and when I returned in the evening, she was gone. She wouldn’t come back until the wee hours of the morning, like this, when I was generally asleep.

I knew that she was doing it on purpose. I was very particular about how I kept my things, especially in my office. Beth was more careless and didn’t always place things back where they should be. I knew that she had checked my calendar because the paperweight wasn’t in its original place. On the calendar, I penciled Broadnax. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that it was Darren Broadnax, a famed divorce attorney.

He came with a high price tag, but he was reputed to be well worth it.

That meeting was two weeks ago. I hadn’t spoken with my wife since, at least not in private. When I saw her, there were usually other people around, like her family and friends. Thesedays, Beth seemed to be surrounded by people all the time, making it impossible for us to talk.

Beth turned away from me and continued up the stairs. I followed her and spoke halfway up the stairwell.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

“I filed for divorce two weeks ago.”

She paused again at the top of the stairs, and I saw her shoulders drop.

“I know.” Her voice was soft and depleted of energy and the fiery animosity I had come to know. She turned around briefly and looked at me before she asked, “Why?”

“You know why,” I answered and followed her into the master suite.

“You really like her, don’t you?” she asked as she unzipped her dress.

I leaned against the doorframe, dropped my head, and sighed.

“This isn’t about a woman.”

“This is about a woman. It’s about Dr. Champagne. You think that I’m stupid, Casimir? I see the way that you look at her. I saw your fucking dick grow hard one day when she was wearing that short yellow dress with the white flowers. You know the one. You complimented her on it that day and those cheap-ass heels that she wore.”

I shook my head and smirked. “It’s always that with you, isn’t it? You never take self-responsibility. It always has to be someone else’s fault or problem, never Bethany’s.”

Bethany walked to the fireplace and turned a sad look in my direction. “You’re leaving me for her.” She sobbed.

“I’m not leaving you for anyone, Bethany. I’m leaving you because we don’t love each other. We never did. We were infatuated with each other; we made a good pairing after your family finished making me over, but you never loved me. You didn’t even know me, so how could you love me?”

“Are you saying that you don’t love me?” she asked.

“I’m saying this is about me taking my life back. I’m saying this is about me being the man I was destined to be, not the one your family created. You never gave me a chance to love you, Beth.”

“Then why have you stayed in the marriage this long?” She cried.

“Because once I agreed to be married, I was determined that I wasn’t going to walk away without giving it everything that I had. I tried. You didn’t want this.”

“I did. I do.” Beth sobbed, jumped up, and ran to me.

Beth lowered to her knees and tugged at my hands, begging, “Please don’t leave me.”

My mind was already made up. There wasn’t anything that I could do. Whether Giselle Champagne ever existed or not, I wouldn’t continue with this farce of a marriage. I needed more than what Beth was willing to offer, and she deserved more than what I could offer. She was right; I never loved her. I had love for her. As a person, as a human being, I loved the woman. But I wasn’t in love with her, nor did I desire her anymore.

“Get up, Beth,” I whispered.

“No. You can’t leave me, Cas.”

“I can’t stay either.”

“Please. Oh God, please don’t leave me. I have nothing else. No one in this world who cares about me and will tell me the truth about me but you.”

“And yet, none of that has mattered in the last five years. You didn’t listen. You didn’t give a shit, Beth. Why now?”

“I did. Oh my God, I did. I tried to change my ways, but it’s hard . . . You don’t understand what it’s like growing up in this family with the expectations that I have on me.”

“What do you want from me, Beth? We tried counseling because you said that you wanted to get us the help we needed, but you only wanted me to change.”

“I think we would have done great if we had gone to another counselor. She was never the one we should have gone to. I’ll bet she got her degree online. She was no good. I saw how she watched you, how she wanted you, and how she always made it seem as if everything was my fault. All the questions, the insinuations, the demands were all to point out my flaws!”

I was fed up with Bethany’s theatrics and, I wasn’t in the mood to listen to her blame Giselle for everything that was already wrong in our marriage long before we met Giselle.

“That’s not true. She was trying to—”

“I knew it! You want her. I hate you! I hate you!”

She began to beat me with her fists as she screamed and called me every word in the book. She threatened to have Giselle’s license suspended, and then she threatened to

sue her.

I grabbed her and carried her to the bed.

“Stop, Beth. Stop with the antics. You need to relax and get some rest. You’re upset; you’ve had too much to drink, and you were right. It’s late. I should have waited until the morning to have this conversation.”

“Noooo.” She sobbed.

“Yes, please, just go to bed. Get some rest, Beth. I’ll talk to you in the morning.”

“Please don’t go, Cas.”

“What?”

“Stay here. Hold me for the night. Please?” she asked and looked up at me with those teary, catlike green eyes.

I sighed.

“Beth, you forced me out of here and into the guest bedroom three months ago.”

“I don’t want to be alone. Just for the night, please.”

“Why didn’t you put this care into the marriage long before now, Beth?”

She sniffled.

“I’m sorry. I just always seem to be making so many mistakes.”

“Why try to go to counseling if you weren’t going to put the work in?”

“Maybe we could try it again? There’s got to be another doctor that we could see. A therapist who we could both relate to and feel comfortable with.”

“I don’t think it’s about who the therapist or doctor is, Beth. There are deeper issues that we have to address. An arranged marriage was the wrong thing for either of us. We’re both deeply passionate, emotional people with strong personalities. Forcing the two of us into something that our fathers wanted more than we did was the wrong move.”

“It didn’t have to be.”

“Do you remember the man you met, Beth? I’m nothing like him anymore.”

“But you’re even better. You’re the COO of a very large and prominent company. You have business constituents around the world. People know your name, and they respect you.”

“As Bethany Huffington-Bradwell’s husband.”

“That’s not true. People respect you and know who you are as your own person.”

“We were never on the same page, Beth. I don’t expect that to change now.”

“What does she have that I don’t?”

“Why do you keep making this about someone else?”

“I know that you have feelings for her. You don’t have to lie to me.”

“I’m not lying to you. This divorce was brought on by the fact that I want to be free. It’s time that I started living my life and stop living in the shadows of others.”

“What is it that you want?” she asked.

“To be happy.”

“You have millions in the bank, and you’re worth even more than that. How could you not be happy?”

“Happiness isn’t all about money. Is it nice to buy things that I want without worrying about sacrificing other shit? Yes. Is it cool to be able to pay my bills without worrying about where the money’s coming from? Hell yeah, but that’s not what life is about to me, Beth. You never got that.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

“You only wanted to hang out with those hoodlums you used to run with.” She sniffled.

“Those hoodlums were my friends. They were people who got me.”

“Even your dad didn’t care for the crowd that you ran around with. He always said that you didn’t come from that.”

“Maybe I didn’t, but they were the people who I chose to be around. They were the ones who understood me. For my father’s dream, for your father’s beliefs, and your persistence, I turned my back on all that shit. I’ve regretted it every day since.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way, Cas.”

“Go to sleep, Beth,” I replied and headed to my suite.

Before I cleared the doorway, Beth threw her shoes at me, and I ducked, but one of them hit me in the head. I rushed down the hallway after her as she ran to her room. I caught up with her moments after she cleared the French doors.

Beth grabbed the fire poker from the fireplace and swung it at me.

“The fuck is wrong with you?” I growled.

“I will not grant you a divorce. I will have your ass tied up in court so long that your nuts will shrivel, and your semen will beso dried out you will never have kids. And I’ll have that bitch’s job!” Beth shrieked as she thrust the fire poker out at me.

“And I will destroy you,” I growled.

“You don’t have the power to!” she shouted, thrusting the fire poker again.

I timed my movement perfectly and grabbed her around the waist. I threw her on the bed, grabbed both her hands, and held them above her head. I refused to let her go but squeezed her wrist until she released the fire poker, and it clattered to the hardwood floor.

“Watch me,” I snarled.

Giselle

TWO MONTHS LATER

Piling into my Infiniti, our laughter filled the air. We enjoyed an afternoon of rock climbing and checking out the latest exhibit at the National Center for Civil and Human Rights. We returned to my townhouse to shower and change before heading to dinner at Soldier’s. Now that our bellies were full of African cuisine, we were ready to dance off the pounds we gained.

“That ass is gonna spread. You know that, right?” Raegan piped up from the back seat.

“Who, me?” I asked, pointing at myself as I looked into the rearview mirror, pulling out of the parking spot.

“Mm-hmm,” Raegan muttered.

“Why?”

“All that food you just wolfed down, and then you got a plate of Senegalese Chicken Yassa to go.”

“I can afford to eat like this because I hit the gym or jog, and I play tennis every week. See, unlike my friend Raegan, I’m not lazy and don’t mind working off what I gain because I know I love to eat,” I stated, smacking my lips and then twisting my neck. I smirked at Raegan’s reflection in the rearview mirror.

“Okay, children. That’s enough,” Eriss chided from the passenger seat, where she had reclined her seat all the way back.

“I’m just saying. And look at you, Riss. You can barely stay up. All that food has made you tired. How much dancing do you really think you’re gonna do?” Raegan teased.

“Uh-uh, I know what this is,” I stated.

“What’re you talking about?” Raegan drawled in her Texas accent.

“Yeah, what are you talking about, Giselle?” Eriss joined in.

“Raegan’s trying to convince us not to go out dancing tonight. But she doesn’t want it to be her fault. Instead, she wants one of us to renege.”

“Okay, why don’t I want to go out dancing, Doctor Mind Reader?” Raegan asked in an aggravated tone.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

“Because you want to go home and get some of that whip appeal put on you. You wanna be up under Gavin,” I teased in a singsong voice.

“Not really. Just a bit tired, is all,” Raegan returned in a deflated voice.

Eriss and I took turns teasing Raegan as we arrived at Club Amethyst. By the time we walked through the door, we had gotten Raegan back in her normal mood, ready to party. She danced on the floor while we made our way to the bar. We placed our drink orders and made small talk while we waited. Once we got our drinks, Eriss headed straight for the dance floor.

I turned back to the bar and slowly sipped my drink. I knew I needed to get off the stool, leave the bar, and hit the floor. After all, I had been the main one to suggest coming to the bar to re-enter the dating world. And now, I sat all alone at the bar, nursing my drink. Finishing it off, I hopped off the stool and danced to the floor to find my girls.

Seeing that they were both occupied with some males when I arrived, I chose to dance alone. I didn’t need a partner. Swaying my hips in the opposite direction of my arms, I angled my head down to the right, closed my eyes, and allowed the music to revive my spirit. The soulful music came to an end as the DJ made an announcement.

“We’re going back. Taking you way back to another time and place. Ladies, we’re kicking that drama outta your lives!” he shouted into the microphone.

Women all over the club screamed and started working their bodies to the hype beat. I was already bouncing to Mary J Blige’s “Family Affair.”

I felt someone dancing behind me as I bounced my butt to the lyrics as Mary told us to get on the dance floor. I ignored the person because I loved the way I lost myself in music whenever I danced.

I rolled my hips around and dipped down before coming back up again. Whoever was behind me, I vibed with his energy and timed our movements. Large hands placed themselves on my hips hesitantly and then gripped tighter as I backed up into him.

I had worked up a sweat and felt my braids coming loose from my bun. I didn't care as I swung my head from side to side, matching the dual movement of my hips. The lyrics made me feel free and uncaring. I was just a woman out having a good time and dancing with some random guy who made it that much more interesting.

"My fellas out there tryna get close on a honey, we're gonna switch it up just a bit. She says this one's all for you, fellas." The DJ's voice boomed over the microphone as Janet's "All For You" poured out through the club's speakers.

I walked to the edge of the dance floor, never turning to see my mystery partner. Just as I reached the edge of the dancefloor, someone grabbed my hand and pulled it back. I recognized the scent of the mystery man and turned back around to plead off dancing, but my breath hitched in my throat.

Confusion shot through me like the burn of a strong vodka, and I blinked before I narrowed my eyes. I'd had a couple of drinks, but I didn't have that many. Surely, I wasn't seeing things. When Casimir released that sexy chuckle, I shook my head. "What're you doing here?" I asked.

"Having a celebratory night out at my favorite spot. Breaks the monotony," he replied, pulling me to him.

"Umm, was that you?" I asked, pointing my thumb over my shoulder at the dance

floor.

Casimir pulled his bottom lip into his mouth, and those onyx eyes flashed in the darkness of the club as he nodded. “I wanna share this dance too.”

“No,” I replied. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea.” I turned around and walked away from him. I had made it only a few steps before he caught up with me and tugged me back toward the dance floor.

“Why not?” he asked, dropping his hand from my wrist to my waist and swaying slightly with me. “We’ve already shared one.”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“You always dance with strangers like that?”

“No. I usually dance by myself, but you . . .”

“You didn’t turn around and look at me or stop me. So, what’s the problem now?”

“Do I really need to explain it?”

“Yeah, I think you do.”

“You’re my client, Casimir. You know that’s forbidden,” my mouth replied, but my body told a different story as my hips swayed from side to side, and my abundant breasts bounced to the beat.

My heart thundered inside my chest, and a warm, uncomfortable heat soared throughout my body. My eyes roamed over the black silk shirt that clung to his form, dropping down to the tailored tan slacks that hugged his thighs and outlined traces of

his manhood.

“So’s the way you’re looking at me right now,” he challenged, a smirk tilting his lips slightly.

My eyes instantly flew back up to his face as I tried desperately to compose my features. I continued to dance with him, and no more words were spoken as we enjoyed the fun beat of the song.

When it was over, he escorted me to the bar, where he ordered us another drink and invited me to his table to share some “important news.”

Although I knew that I shouldn’t go, my curiosity got the best of me, and my feet followed where my mind knew they shouldn’t go.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

“So, what did you want to share with me?” I asked when we had been seated.

“First, let me say that there’s nothing wrong with two consenting adults having a drink and a dance together. It’s all innocent and strictly casual.”

“You know that’s not true, Casimir.”

“It’s not innocent? What? Were you planning to take advantage of me in my weakened state?” he asked.

The smirk on his lips and the gleam evident in his eyes showed that he was clearly teasing me.

“What did you want to tell me?” I asked, redirecting the conversation before I continued down the path that would undoubtedly lead me into a train wreck.

Casimir lowered his gaze from mine and wiped water droplets from his glass.

“First, you’re no longer my therapist. You were fired, so there’s no concerns there.”

“I guess, but I’m not about to argue that with you, Casimir. Now, what did you want to tell me?” I repeated.

“I filed for divorce the day after we left your office.”

I blinked rapidly and stared at him in disbelief. My heart pounded loudly in my chest. So loud that it competed with the thump of the music.

It took several seconds before I could gather my thoughts, but when I did, I tamped down the excitement blossoming in my chest.

“Well, I don’t know if I would say that congratulations are in order. I don’t generally celebrate the ending of someone’s marriage, but if this makes you happy, then I guess I would say ‘best wishes.’”

He smiled and stared at me for several long seconds until I found myself squirming in my seat. His gaze was penetrating, and the heat that flared from his eyes burned me in parts that I didn’t want to think about.

“Thank you.”

“How did she take it?”

He sighed and then lowered his gaze.

“As you might expect that she would. She thought that I was joking at first, then she was disbelieving, and that morphed into outrage, and finally, she became the victim and had a complete meltdown. She blamed everyone in the world, from my parents to my best friend to me to the neighbor across the street.”

“I’m sure that I was thrown in there then.”

He laughed. “Yeah, you were definitely the source of a major portion of Beth’s rant. She wanted to contest the divorce, but thankfully, her father talked some sense into her. As much as he didn’t want us to divorce, he knew that contesting it would cause a bigger scandal. He didn’t need that attention right now.”

“I’m sorry that I couldn’t help you all.”

“Don’t be,” he stated before he reached across the table and grabbed my hands.

His fingers were warm and smooth but firm and rough at the same time. The comfort that I felt holding his hand and the warm energy flowing between us made me uncomfortable. I pulled my hand back.

Casimir changed the subject briefly and talked about his family, the things he wanted to do, and a business he had been working on behind the scenes that he hadn’t shared with anyone. He even stated how he had been working toward divorce long before they met me.

I saw a different side of Casimir, one I suspected existed but was uncertain. Gone was the somber man fighting for control of his life back, but in his place was a carefree soul who was enjoying life in the moment. He shared his love of swimming and playing basketball and how much he hated golf but played anyway to appease his father-in-law. I enticed him to give the more adventurous sports that I loved a try.

“White water rafting and rock climbing?” he asked in an incredulous tone.

Nursing my drink and trying to push the flirtatious manner I had adopted out of my tone, I smiled. “Mm-hmm. A girl has to live, you know. It’s not always logic, theory, and healing with me. Or at least not in the way you’re used to.”

I grew subdued as I thought about Elijah and how we enjoyed so many activities together.

Picking up on it, Casimir grabbed my hand, pushed the drink away, and said, “Come on.”

“Where’re we going?” I asked and followed him.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

“Dancing. It gets your mind off things you shouldn’t be thinking about,” Casimir proclaimed as he led me to the dancefloor. Jack Harlow’s “Lovin’ On Me” played as we stepped onto the dance floor.

I saw Eriss heading off the floor toward the bar, but I had yet to spot Raegan.

After a while, the vibe changed from fun to sexy.

“All right, peeps, it’s time to switch it up a moment. This is for all my lovers in the house,” the DJ announced as Kendrick Lamar’s “luther” flowed through the club.

“Um, maybe we’d better not,” I suggested and prepared to leave the floor.

The last thing that I needed was to dance with him to a slow song. Something dark in Casimir’s eyes flashed as he shook his head from side to side. Pulling me closer to him, he moved us toward the rear of the dance floor. And he held my gaze as we moved slowly to the song, with his hand holding my waist.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d swear you had a twin,” I commented and released a nervous giggle.

“Yeah?” he whispered as he rested his other hand on my hip.

“Mm-hmm,” I murmured, inhaling the citrus scent that clung to his clothes. “The diamond earrings, no suit, your entire flow. It’s not the Casimir Perez I’ve grown to know.”

“Maybe that’s because you really don’t know me after all.” He sighed, holding me tight. “You know the image that the Bradwells and the Huffingtons cultivated. The image was in keeping with their image. They weren’t interested in the real man. They polished me up, dressed me up, hired a man to groom me, and then presented the version that you’ve seen. Besides, I could say the same about you.”

His eyes took the opportunity to caress my curves outlined in a formfitting teal silk dress that stopped a few inches below my butt. The material barely swathed my left breast, in a low curve that angled around my back, up over my right breast, and formed a circular collar around my neck.

The hungry look of desire in his eyes had me backing up from him. Yet, Casimir didn’t release his grip. Instead, he moved back with me until I bumped into a wall behind me.

I knew it was wrong, but I allowed my arms to reach up, and I clasped my fingers together behind his neck. I closed my eyes, resting my head against his chest, and I flinched at SZA singing about how she couldn’t snooze and miss the moment and a man being too important.

I was so deep into the space we created that I didn’t care who was watching. Just for tonight, I would blame it on the alcohol, enjoy Casimir’s attention, and ask no questions.

His hands squeezed my hips before moving around slowly and caressing my bare back. God, I hadn’t been touched by a man in so long that it drove me crazy to feel his warm large hands on my body. I dared to look up into those onyx bedroom eyes and feel myself falling. A couple of deep breaths were not enough to bring rational thought back into my mind. And when he lowered his plump lips against mine, I slightly parted my own, releasing a whimper of pleasure.

I did nothing to stop Casimir when his hands slowly trailed a blaze down my back to grab my ass, squeezing it gently in his large hands. His kisses were soft and gentlemanly as he took his time learning the grooves of my lips and the taste of my peach-flavored lip gloss. Before long, my lips parted all the way and allowed him entrance into my mouth. I savored the watermelon and gin-flavored taste of the drink he had enjoyed.

I moved my hands up to caress the back of his head, enjoying the soft feel of the waves in his hair. Hair that I knew he took pride in grooming. Casimir was the first one to break the kiss, and his eyes searched mine. Mine begged him to do it again. Instead, he lowered his head, wrapped me tight within his arms, and allowed his warm breath to blow down my neck.

“What?” I found my voice in the midst of the roller-coaster ride my emotions were on.

Lifting his head, he stared into my eyes, and his thumb pad stroked my cheek. “You. You make me want things I have no right to claim,” he whispered.

Clearing my throat, I broke out of his grasp. “I think I’d better go.” He refused to let go completely. Our fingers intertwined as I attempted to escape.

His eyes narrowed, and then he replied, “Yeah. You’d better,” before he released my fingers.

I rushed off the dance floor, but when I looked back again, he had disappeared. I needed to find Eriss and Raegan and get the hell out of here.

Giselle

I paced the floor of my office, wearing a pattern on the textured carpet. Why had I

accepted the appointment? It would be so easy just to say no. After all, they had long since canceled my services. When Imani had entered my office an hour earlier telling me about the last-minute scheduling, I should have said no. However, Imani shared that he had pleaded to be penciled in because it was an emergency. There was no way that I could not say no. He was going to be the last appointment of my day.

What did he want to talk to me about? What would he say? How would I respond to him? After the heated dance and kiss that we shared on Saturday night, I needed to stay as far away from him as possible.

Hopping up from my chair, I grabbed my white lab coat from the back of the door and put it on. Buttoning it from the bottom to the very top button, I knew I would look strange. I seldom placed the coat on, but considering the outfit I wore today, it might be for the best.

I would not normally think twice about my crème mini skirt and red, satin, short-sleeved blouse with the plunging neckline. All things considered, Casimir would not look at me like my other clients, not after Saturday. Without a doubt, I knew this would be his last session. I planned to hand him the cards of two other therapists he could call if he wanted to continue counseling.

My eyes glanced back to the two cards sitting side by side. Dr. Miriam Lassiter and Greg and Regina Dubois.

I stepped outside my office for a moment and walked into the lobby. “Imani, when Mr. Per—”

My words were cut off as the outer door of the office opened, revealing the man himself. His eyes dropped to the lab coat I wore and back up to my eyes. His eyes held a look of disappointment.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

“Mr. Perez, you’re here early,” I said, glancing at my watch.

“I know. Can you still take me?” Casimir asked, never taking his eyes off me.

“Sure,” I replied, holding his glance as well.

I led the way to my office and never once turned to look at Imani. I knew I’d hear all about it later after Casimir left.

I closed the door firmly before turning to face him. Casimir had not taken his normal seat on the couch as he always did. Instead, he stood behind me with his arms crossed over his chest.

“So, what did you need to see me about?” I asked, removing my glasses from my face and nervously cleaning them on the hem of my lab coat.

“Saturday.”

Dropping my glasses on the floor, I kneeled to pick them up, only to brush hands with him, as he had the same intention I did.

“Thank you,” I replied, standing up and holding the edge of my desk to steady my movements.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his eyes darkening and a slight smile tilting those full, luscious lips.

“Yes, Casimir. Um, have a seat, please,” I said, gesturing to the couch and walking around the desk to my chair. I froze in place when I felt his hand on my lower waist.

“Don’t do this.”

Spinning around, I furrowed my eyebrows and stared up at him. “Do what, Casimir?”

“Act like nothing happened Saturday night.”

“Nothing did happen, Casimir.”

“That’s how we’re going to play this thing, huh?” he asked, shoving his hands in his pockets.

I knew I was wrong to have encouraged the attraction and flirtation we had. I should have never allowed it to go on for as long as it had but instead should have addressed it and cut it off. There had been plenty of opportunities to discuss it after he had shown up without Bethany.

“Casimir, for obvious reasons, we are both out of line here. Especially me. I have a moral obligation to steer my clients in the right direction, and the moment an attraction stemmed between us—”

He reached out and grabbed my hand, holding me in place. “So, you admit you’re attracted to me too?”

“That’s not the point of this discussion, Casimir.”

“But that’s why I came.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t have,” I chided, then flinched when I saw the look of

hurt in his eyes. “Look, I could lose my license over this, and I haven’t worked this hard, nor have I come this far to throw it away over some . . . fling!” I argued.

“Fling? We haven’t even done anything yet,” he argued back, frowning at me.

“Yet? That’s my point, Casimir. Nothing will happen because I won’t allow it. You’re my client.”

“Not anymore,” he replied in a low tone.

“But you were. The state of Georgia is not like the American Psychological Association, which suggests a waiting period before we can engage in romantic or intimate relationships with former clients. Georgia enforces an indefinite period after termination of services. Someone could file an ethics complaint against me, causing me to lose my license. Is that what you want?”

“No, but—”

“Then I suggest you drop all of this. It’s not in either of our best interests.” I pulled away and walked to my chair, pulling it out and dropping down in it.

Staring at my hands for a moment, I felt as if I were the one seeking therapy as he waited for me to speak.

“Casimir, we are . . . both in a vulnerable place. You just ended your marriage, and you’re seeking something that your wife couldn’t give to you. Then here I am helping you sort through all these feelings, and so it’s natural that you would turn that attraction my way.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

He sneered at me. “If it’s that simple, Doc, then what’s your excuse?”

“I’m . . . I’m grieving. Naturally, this would happen when an attractive male shows interest in me. I might react in a way that I shouldn’t, especially when someone such as yourself lets your guard down and shares your most intimate thoughts. It’s natural,” I repeated and shrugged my shoulders as if the answer were obvious.

“Really? Surely, I’m not the first guy to come along and express interest in you, Doc.”

“No, you’re not. Yet, you’re . . .” I allowed that thought to remain unspoken. I was treading in dangerous waters.

“I’m what?” he urged.

I breathed a sigh of relief as he finally took his seat.

“I’m not the one here for counseling. What is it that I can do for you, Casimir?”

“I’m the only one you’ve been attracted to. That’s what you were going to say. Wasn’t it?”

My eyes shifted away from his as I turned to face my computer monitor. I tapped a couple of keys, my computer fired up, and I was logged in within seconds.

“I have a couple of therapists that I think you should consider. One of them is a reputable therapist with more than thirty years in marital counseling. The other is

actually a couple, and they are Christian and—”

“Dammit, Giselle! I don’t need counseling. I’m no longer married.”

“Then I don’t understand, Casimir. Why are you here?”

“Because . . . I need you.”

My heart thudded in my chest, and just the mere mention of his needing me turned me on. Rather than address that comment, I turned the query back on him.

“Why did you file for divorce, Casimir?”

“Because I was tired of living a lie. It’s like I always knew that I was, and for a while, it was perfectly acceptable. This last year became more difficult, making me realize I couldn’t continue my life like that. Then I came here . . . and you gave me a different perspective. The thing that I admire about you is that you are true to yourself, and I know that I don’t know you as well as you know me, but I can tell that about you. You’re true to your culture, your roots, who you are as a woman and person. I respect that, and it has encouraged me.

“This divorce isn’t just something that I thought of overnight. It’s something I’ve been contemplating for more than a year but just had the courage to do. It’s part of a soul-searching journey that I’m on,” he said, balling his fists up and pressing them against his chest to emphasize his point.

“Then you need to do that on your own. Trying to draw me into your life right now will only further complicate things, Casimir.”

Shaking his head, he countered. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Casimir, how do you think your actions are going to impact your family? Everyone knows they’re in the middle of an election year. Although you’ve divorced her, maybe you should stand by her side right now.”

“You’re speaking from a place of desperation. I don’t believe you feel that way. You’ve always encouraged both Bethany and me to be true to who we are and our feelings about one another and our lives, no matter how painful. So, realistically, I don’t really care about the impact my decisions will have on the political campaign. Hell, he doesn’t care about me like that. I’m nothing more than a pawn in his game, and this is my life. I’m ready to live it again.”

“As difficult as it is for me to say this, I don’t think that I served the purpose that I was supposed to. Perhaps, because of my selfish interests, I may have misguided you in some of my advice and the way I handled this entire manner. Casimir, I have my own soul-searching to do, but I’d like to encourage you to take some time for yourself. Get your heart and mind right before you pursue anything with anyone. At least seek the advice of another therapist, if nothing else. Please,” I reiterated when he opened his mouth to speak.

“I am a thirty-eight-year-old man who had the opportunity to travel the world at an early age. I’ve seen a lot and been exposed to more than most people ever will in a lifetime. I’m a humble and thoughtful man, never one to jump to conclusions or make decisions lightly. I will give you the time that you need to reconcile your heart and your mind, because, obviously, you need it. But me?” he commented, standing up and straightening his suit jacket. “I already know what I want. I’m not delusional, and this attraction isn’t some form of hero worship, as you reference. Another thing I am is patient . . . but don’t wear it thin. I will be back, and when I do, you won’t know what hit you.”

I stood with my mouth hanging slightly open as I watched him walk out of my office, knowing that he wasn’t walking out of my life.

Giselle

Casimir Perez was like a hawk, watching and waiting to strike and take his prey down at the first sign of weakness. Almost three weeks had passed since I last saw him. I had no idea that the next time I saw him, my guard would be completely down, and it would be in a social setting and not a professional one. He would strike when I was at my most vulnerable.

“You look lovely tonight.” Lloyd Andrews, a fellow psychologist, complimented as he smiled at me.

Lloyd was a married man, but his wife was out of the country at a medical convention. With her urging, he invited me to escort him to the gala tonight. It was an annual fundraising ball for mental health professionals to come together and raise money for research and the support of mental health in the African American community.

Although it was geared toward mental health and mental health professionals, many others were invited, including wealthy entrepreneurs, philanthropists, celebrities, and government officials.

“Thank you, Lloyd. And thanks for inviting me.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

“I’m actually surprised that you accepted my invitation,” he admitted as he looked around the room.

I took a sip of my wine before I asked, “Why is that?”

“You haven’t attended a single event professional since Elijah passed.”

I sighed.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring the mood down.”

I smiled politely at him. Lloyd was someone who I trusted and could be honest with.

“You didn’t bring the mood down. I was just thinking that it was time for me to come out into the world again. It’s time for me to live.”

“I’m glad you’re starting to see that on your own. May I have this dance?” Lloyd asked.

“I would be glad to.”

We walked to the floor and danced as the hired band played a classical song.

“For a long time, I felt that Elijah’s suicide was a reflection of my role in his life.”

“You know that’s not true. I told you that back then.”

“I know that, Lloyd. It was difficult for me to comprehend, though. I understood it on a professional level, but I couldn’t get it on an emotional level. Here I was, a mental health professional, and I couldn’t even help my husband. In my mind, it said that I was a failure as a wife and a professional. I was embarrassed, and I felt like people were looking at me and judging me. He didn’t love me enough. I wasn’t woman enough. Why would anyone go to her for services when she couldn’t help the man she pledged her life to?”

Lloyd looked down at me with compassion-filled eyes. “I’m sorry that you went through all of that. Despite your constituents telling you the truth about everything else, it obviously was something you needed to go through on your own.”

I nodded and smiled. Finding myself getting choked up, I changed the subject. “So, Marilyn . . . how is she feeling about the twins going off to high school this year?”

He laughed. “I think my wife is on the verge of a mid-life crisis. She’s talking about it’s time to travel the world, and when the kids graduate high school, she wants to sell our home and buy an RV.”

He shook his head and laughed again.

“It sounds like she’s trying to prepare herself for a life without her kids. It has to be difficult for a mother watching her kids grow up and needing her less and less.”

“I would agree with that, Giselle, but Marilyn isn’t a woman whose identity was steeped in her role as a wife and mother. She took those roles seriously, but she’s also made a name for herself in the medical community.”

“She has. Give her time. She’ll be fine.”

“Did I tell you that she dyed her hair red last week?”

My mouth dropped open, and I laughed just as I felt a hand touch my shoulder lightly.

“May I have this dance?”

My heart stopped in my chest because, what in the hell was he doing here?

“Of course,” Lloyd stated before he turned to whisper to me. “Be careful. Casimir Perez is not a man a vulnerable lady like you needs to be alone with. He’s a charmer, and word has it that he’s on the market,” Lloyd warned. Aloud, he continued, “Giselle, I am going over there to speak with Claire Yancy about a donation.” He bobbed his head across the room to where a local cable network owner stood chatting with someone else.

“Okay, Lloyd. I’ll see you soon,” I replied as Casimir stepped in front of me and took Lloyd’s place.

“What are you doing here?” I hissed.

“Good evening, Giselle. It’s lovely to see you again too,” Casimir replied coolly.

His eyes slowly drank me in from head to toe, and I saw the look of desire and appreciation in his eyes. “You look lovely tonight.”

I felt exposed in my daring, strapless, bold red gown with its plunging neckline. The large, sweeping skirt had made me feel like an elegant belle, but the way that Casimir’s eyes devoured my cleavage made me feel sexy and sensual.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

“Thank you. You clean up very well yourself,” I remarked as Casimir held me close. Through the swath of silk fabric, I could feel his heated touch. His warm breath caressed my cheek as he held me close, and my thighs clenched.

The man was deliciously intoxicating in the sharp tuxedo he wore tonight.

“Thank you.”

“You still haven’t answered my question.”

“I was invited as a donor.”

“But of course, you are. Is . . .”

“No. She’s not with me. I came alone.”

“Oh.”

I hadn’t realized that I had breathed a sigh of relief until he chuckled.

“What’s so funny?”

“You. You’re so transparent, though you try to hide it.”

“Hide what?”

“Your attraction to me,” he stated.

I stopped moving and stared up at him. Casimir still held my waist with one arm, and my other hand was still clasped to his. People moved all around us, and though I saw them in my peripheral vision, at that moment, no one mattered except for him.

I licked my lips as I stared at his, wishing they would move closer and devour mine. He smelled so good. I wanted to lick my tongue along the pulse at the base of his neck and see if he tasted as good as he smelled. My hands wanted to run down the planes of his chest, underneath the white shirt he wore, and I wanted to rip him out of that tuxedo. I felt myself leaning closer to him.

“You might want to keep moving before people start to talk,” he whispered with a wink and a smirk.

I looked around and released a huff of breath. In that moment, I had been lost in my attraction and desire for a man who I knew was off-limits. I had wanted to kiss him so badly that I almost had.

If he had not spoken, I would have made a grave mistake right here in front of other people that I could not take back.

“Uhm, I need something to drink,” I replied and pulled my hand free of his.

I toyed nervously with the diamond choker at my neck, and he nodded. But he didn’t let go.

“Please,” I stated.

Casimir moved his hand from around my waist and took my free hand in his. He led me off the dance floor and to a table at the rear of the room. No one was sitting there, but there were place cards at the table, letting me know that the table was assigned to someone.

“I think we’re sitting at someone’s table, Casimir.”

“We are. Mine.”

“What about your guests?”

He smirked.

“Casimir?”

“I purchased this table tonight for you and me.”

“What do you mean? How did you know that I would be here?”

“My mother is on the committee that puts this gala together each year. When she invited me, I was at her house and happened to see the guest list.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

“Oh, you just happened to see it?”

“Let’s just say that she left her computer unlocked, and while she went to the kitchen, I checked her computer for bugs.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You knew I was coming,” I accused.

“I had a feeling you might attend. I wasn’t sure, but I decided to check. I saw your name there, and I took the chance you might actually show up. So, I purchased a table for eight.”

“Where are your other six guests if I’m one?”

“In my imagination, I guess.”

“These aren’t real people?” I asked, waving my hand at the place cards around the table.

“No.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to have a place where you and I could talk and be alone.”

“Don’t you think that would be so obvious, and people will start talking?”

He shrugged. “I don’t really care. No one pays attention to what happens at these

things. Everyone's too busy getting drunk and sneaking around with such and such's husband or wife."

He said that so nonchalantly, and I wondered how much experience he had with affairs like this one. I used to attend this ball all the time with Elijah, but I was so wrapped up in my husband that I didn't pay anything else much attention.

"Okay, I'll bite."

"Please don't," he replied with a smirk.

I realized my snafu instantly, and I blushed. "Why did you want my attention?"

"Why else would a man want a woman's attention, Giselle?"

"There are many reasons, Casimir. He wants to tell her that he likes her perfume and wants to buy a bottle for his wife. He wants her opinion on a piece of lingerie he's buying for his girlfriend. He wants to ask her the best recipe for pound cake. Or maybe he just wants to have sex with her."

Casimir narrowed his gaze, and the heat that emanated from it caused my body to erupt with desire. I crossed my legs and uncrossed them repeatedly before I calmed down.

"I'm not a man who's into playing games, so let me make it plain for you. I want your attention because I want you, Giselle. All of you. I want to inhale your scent and have it coat every part of my being. I want to see you in the most beautiful piece of lingerie ever made by a man. I want to feed you from my fingers until you're sucking them clean, and my dick aches from the feel of your tongue on my fingers. And after all that's done, then I want you in my bed, crying out underneath me, calling my name, and begging me for more. Does that fit your theory of perfume, lingerie,

recipes, and sex?”

I literally held my breath. I couldn't believe that Casimir had said those things to me. Sure, he kissed me at the nightclub. Yes, I knew he was attracted to me, as was I to him. But the words he had just spoken to me left me wanting to rush to the bathroom to check to see if my panties had disintegrated. Every inch of my body was on fire with need for this man.

A waiter passed by at that moment, and Casimir reached out and grabbed a drink from his tray. He handed it to me, and our fingers touched as I took the drink from his hand.

“Did I make it plain enough for you?”

I gulped the wine just as he stated, “Slow down.”

I set the wine aside, rested my elbow on the table, and propped my head against the tips of my fingers. I ran my finger around the rim of my glass and replied, “Yes. You most certainly made your intentions known.”

“Good,” he replied.

Casimir reached across the table and grabbed my fingers. They were still wet with wine, and I briefly wondered if he were about to suck the droplets of wine from my finger pads. Sensing what I must have been thinking, Casimir chuckled and then further explained. “But that's not all that I want from you.”

I lifted my gaze to him, and my eyebrows dipped in confusion.

“I want to see you blush and get embarrassed at my words a thousand more times like you did just then. I want to see you walk through the door at the end of the workday

after you've helped someone put their life in order, and you're wearing that triumphant boss bitch smile. I want to see you on your knees in prayer. I want to see your hair tied up in a scarf, and you're makeup free while you're singing and dancing as you clean the house. I want to see you asleep at night with your face resting on my chest and your hands resting underneath your face. I want to see you let down every guard and every defense in my presence because you trust me to be everything that you need and then some."

"Wow. You've thought about this a lot, huh?" I asked as I laughed nervously.

“Almost from the day that we met.”

I lifted my gaze to his.

“Don’t pretend that we haven’t been attracted from the rip.”

“Oh, I’m sure of that. You’re a handsome man, and I’m not arrogant, but I know that I’m an attractive woman.”

“Beautiful. Gorgeous. Stunning. But it’s not just that. It’s the way your mind works, how you challenge me, and the beauty and endless possibilities that you see in others. That’s what attracts me to you, Giselle.”

I looked up and spotted someone walking in our direction.

“I think we should bring a halt to this conversation.”

“For now, but it’s not over,” he stated.

The man walked up to him and greeted Casimir heartily. Although Casimir introduced the man, I didn’t remember his name after it left Casimir’s lips. The two men talked about something related to the ball, but my thoughts were tied up.

I found myself thinking about all those things that Casimir had mentioned. I knew that I had no right to even fantasize about them, but how attractive and how enticing the most mundane things sounded when he described him. I wanted him to see me do all those things too. I also wanted to see him with his shirt off, sweat coating his

body, and his muscles rippling underneath the noonday sun as he cut the grass. And then smell his musky scent when he walked into the kitchen to get a glass of iced tea after he'd finished the job. I wanted to see his Adam's apple bobbing as he gulped the tea down for refreshment. I wanted to see him lost in thought as he pondered a particularly challenging business dilemma that he needed to resolve.

And that was when I realized that no matter how much I tried to deny him, no matter how far and fast I ran, I would eventually allow him to catch up to me because I wanted him as desperately as he wanted me.

Casimir

"Here's your order, Mr. Perez," the florist stated and handed me the large bouquet.

"Thank you, Gayle."

I accepted the bouquet from her arms and headed out of the tiny shop. Once I secured the flowers in the front seat beside me, I stopped at Soldier's, picked up my order, and continued my journey.

When I pulled up to the building, I breathed a sigh of relief. I knew that I was taking a risk by doing this, but it was something that I wanted to do. I warned Giselle. So there was no reason that she should be too shocked. I removed the flowers and the food and headed into the building.

I was glad that Imani had left for the day. I'd found that tidbit out by doing a little unintentional stalking. I noticed on a few occasions when Bethany and I had been at the office for a later appointment, Imani would normally be gone by five thirty. On a few other occasions that I had driven by, I would see Giselle's car outside in the parking lot. I only knew it was her car because one day, she walked out with Bethany and me, and I had seen her get into it.

One day, I jokingly teased Imani that she kept bankers' hours. She had responded by saying that she was in the door by eight thirty every morning and out by five thirty. She said she was still in school and had a little boy, so she didn't have time to play around.

I tucked that away for future reference, hoping that it would work in my favor. I assumed that Giselle kept late hours, because she seemed like the workaholic type. I signed in at the guard's desk before I headed down the hallway and walked past the receptionist's desk after entering her office.

I tapped lightly at the door and heard her shuffling around inside. I knew that I would catch her off guard because I was certain she wasn't expecting any patients this late in the evening.

A week had passed since I had seen Giselle at the ball for mental health professionals. I was able to sneak one more dance in with her that night before her friend, Lloyd, pulled her away. I had hoped that she would leave with me that night, but I had no such luck.

I had been dying to see her again. When she pulled the door open, my hunger only grew more. I could see the hesitation in her eyes.

"Oh, I was wondering who was here this late in the evening."

"Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you."

"I wasn't really scared. I know that people have to check in at the security desk and pass through the metal detectors, but I wasn't expecting anyone."

"I come bearing gifts," I stated and held the two Soldier's bags and flowers up for her to see.

She stuck her head out of the door and looked left and right.

“I made sure that I eliminated any witnesses,” I teased.

Giselle smirked at me, tugged my hand to pull me inside, and then closed her door.

“What’s all of this about?”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

“This is my way of showing my appreciation for you.”

“Everything that I’ve done, Casimir, was just me doing my job.”

“Maybe, or maybe you genuinely cared, and I felt that, and it impacted my life.”

“I care about all of my patients.”

“Because you have a beautiful heart. Now are you going to let me appreciate you or not?” I asked.

“Well, considering that you brought food from Soldier’s, a girl can’t complain, can she?”

I followed her as she removed a couple of magazines from the coffee table.

“You can set the food here. I’ll be back. Let me go to the break room and grab some paper towels and—”

“No need. I’ve got everything, including this beautiful vase for your flowers,” I remarked and handed the peony and rose bouquet to Giselle.

“They’re so beautiful, and they smell amazing.” She closed her eyes and sniffed them.

“I’ve got forks, spoons, a couple of knives, and napkins.”

“I know something you didn’t remember,” she declared as she set the flowers on a bookshelf underneath a window.

“What’s that?”

“Drinks.”

I opened the second bag and pulled the sweet teas and straws out. I lifted an eyebrow, and she giggled.

“I don’t know why I underestimated you.”

I shrugged and asked, “May we please eat now?”

“Sure.”

We sat down and ate our meal. Giselle told me how her day had gone, and I shared a little of mine. When we finished, Giselle sat back and asked, “Casimir, what are you doing?”

“Trying to show you all the reasons that you need me in your life.”

It was her turn to lift an eyebrow as she asked, “Need you?”

“I told you. You need a shoulder to cry on, someone to tell how your day went, and someone to take care of you when you forget the little things . . . like getting out early enough to grab something to eat.”

“How do you know that I haven’t eaten?”

I pointed to her trashcan and answered, “That Kind bar and water bottle is not a

complete meal, ma'am."

"It has vital nutrients."

"What else have you eaten all day?"

She turned her head and bit her bottom lip to hide her smile.

"Precisely," I replied. "You need someone who will think about all the things that you don't."

"I can take care of myself, Casimir."

"But isn't it nice to have someone who will take care of you when you forget to?"

“And what about you?”

“That’s where I’m hoping you’ll fit in,” I replied and winked at her.

“I walked right into that one, didn’t I?”

“You did. You see this thing that we’re doing?” I asked, pointing a finger back and forth between us.

She nodded. “What about it?”

“Don’t you miss this?”

“This what?”

“Back and forth that we’re doing. Someone to have an idle conversation with at the end of a night. Someone you can relax and unwind with.”

“Is that what you think I’m doing?”

“That’s exactly what you’ve been doing.”

Giselle dropped her head back against the couch. “I don’t want to do this,” she whined.

“Why not?”

“You make everything so difficult and complicated in my life. I need smooth and easy, Casimir. Not turbulent and stormy waters. My anxiety cannot take that.”

“Self-diagnosed?”

“Very. But you’re not Dr. Perez, and I’m not a patient in need of therapy. Off of me.”

I smirked at her reference and replied, “Girl, when I’m on you, trust me, you’ll know. And when I get on you, there won’t be any backing down.”

“Why do you do this?”

“Do you remember when I told you that I was thirty-eight and I’ve seen a lot? I wasted so much time on a marriage that was not meant to be. I’m not wasting another minute on securing the woman of my dreams at my side.”

“But what if I’m not? What if I’m not all that you think I am?”

“And what if you are? What if I miss out on the opportunity to make my dreams come true? I’d rather waste time finding out that we’re not perfect for each other than spend a lifetime of regret because I didn’t make you mine.”

Giselle blew out a breath and dropped her head in her hands. I leaned over and massaged her shoulders. I felt her relaxing underneath my touch, and when she caught herself moaning at the contact, she jerked away from me.

I turned her head around so that she could face me.

“I might not be anything you need.”

“And you could be everything that I’ve hoped for. Let me ask you something.”

“Go ahead.”

“If I met you in some other fashion, and I was never your patient, and this attraction between us still existed, would you run the risk of getting to know me?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. I’d like to think so.”

“Then don’t let the fear of losing your license be your obstacle. We can overcome this together if you trust me.”

Giselle searched my eyes for a while, and I wondered if she was trying to determine if she could trust me or not. I reached out and drew a line down the slope of her nose before it dipped off into the middle of her lips. I pushed them in, and she sucked my finger into her mouth.

My eyes narrowed at the contact and the heat that emanated between us. I wondered if Giselle remembered what I had told her at the ball.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

“You’re playing with fire, Giselle.”

She promptly released my finger from inside of her mouth. I slowly dragged it down her lip, tugging it open as I went before I gripped her chin and pulled on it.

I leaned closer, and desire grew within me as she leaned closer to me. I held her chin between my index finger and thumb.

There was no rushing the moment as I licked along her bottom lip and then sucked on her top one. I pressed my lips against hers and indulged in the plush, satiny feel of her glossed lips against mine.

Slowly, her eyes closed, and Giselle lifted a hand to the back of my neck. The pressure was so subtle, but I felt her pull me closer. I gave in to her urgency and angled my head as I turned the moment of feeling each other out into a kiss.

When her lips parted, her tongue darted out briefly. That little peek was all I needed to entwine mine with hers. I savored the spiciness of her tongue as we wrestled for dominance. Giselle’s hunger knew no limitations as she pressed deeper into the kiss, moaning and seeking what else I had to offer.

I cupped her face, and she grabbed my hand and pulled it away. We didn’t break the kiss. She dragged my hand down and placed it at her heart. My hand grew hot from the feeling and pressure of lying between her breasts. My dick ached in my pants and urged me to move a little more to the left so that I could feel the soft tissue. But I refused to move faster than she allowed me.

And as if she came back to her senses, she dipped her head and broke the kiss. We said nothing as she panted softly. Her heartbeat hammered against her chest walls. I kept my hand in place for a while and found comfort in knowing that I made her feel this way, that her heart was beating emphatically for me.

Giselle's eyes opened, and though our foreheads rested against each other, she didn't look at me. I caressed her face.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

She pulled back from the kiss and asked, "What do you want from me?"

"Everything."

Giselle

I wasn't sure what it was that woke me, but when I woke up groggy, I knew there was something out of the ordinary happening. There seemed to be a lot of activity happening outside of my bedroom window. It was lighter than it should have been at a little after four in the morning, and the acrid, thick smell of smoke infiltrated my senses before it caused me to start choking.

I jerked upright in bed from my previously prone position. I coughed and swung my legs over the side of the bed. I needed some water. I shoved my feet into my house shoes to get some water, and that was when I heard it.

Loud bangs were coming from somewhere in my townhome. Confused, I ran to one of the bedroom windows and peered out. Smoke filled the air, and several residents were out on the lawn across the street. In the middle of the confusion were three large fire trucks, men scurrying everywhere, and water coated the street.

I heard the loud banging again, and it was more like a thud than a bang. I rushed out into the hallway and down the stairs to realize that the thud I heard was knocking, and my downstairs was filled with smoke.

The acrid smoke quickly filled my lungs and began to burn them. The coughing grew worse, and I could feel my chest grow tighter. I pulled my nightgown up over my nose, trying to block out the smell, but it stung my eyes too.

I spotted my keys hanging on the hook close to the door, and my purse that I had hung up the evening before was on the table beneath it. I grabbed my keys and purse at the last minute, thankful that I had the presence of mind last night to leave them down here. The coughing took hold of my body, and I felt myself crumple to my knees.

The door flew open, and two firemen rushed inside.

“Is there anyone else in the house?” one of the firemen asked as he lifted me into his arms.

I continued choking through the smoke, but I was able to shake my head no. A third fireman rushed inside as the first one carried me away, and the second one proceeded deeper into my house.

“Bury your face into my jacket. I got you,” the husky voice stated.

I had no idea what was going on, and I realized that was the result of my sleep-addled brain. I blinked several times as the fireman set me down on a gurney with two EMTs hovering and waiting for him to move.

“What’s going on?” I asked, trying to peer around at the situation.

I saw flames going up from the building, two units over from mine. Angry flames licked at the night sky, filling it with thick, black smoke and creating a fog in the night sky. It ate at the tree limbs that hovered over the building, and the beautiful leaves and the white blossoms of the nearby dogwood tree were no more.

“One of the neighboring units caught fire,” the fireman explained.

One of the EMTs followed that explanation with one of his own. “We’re just going to check you for any injuries. What’s your name, ma’am?” He looked as if he were barely out of high school.

“Dr. Champagne. Dr. Giselle Champagne,” I clarified.

“She may need some oxygen. She was choking when we brought her out of the house,” the fireman stated and rushed off to help his coworkers.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

I watched all the activity as the EMTs checked me out to ensure that I had no injuries. When they were satisfied that I didn't have any, they released me.

"What happened?" I asked a couple who lived across the walk from my unit.

"Apparently, the lady in 232 fell asleep with the stove on."

"Oh my goodness. Is she okay? What about her babies?" I asked.

I recalled that she had a set of twins that were six years old.

"The little girl was unconscious when they brought her out, but the little boy was alert," the man stated.

"I'm not so sure about the mother, though. She sustained some injuries from what I overheard one of the EMTs stating, but her mental state appeared even worse," his wife stated.

"Oh my goodness. I can't—"

Before I could say another word, an explosion went up in the building beside mine. And like dominos, the fire leaped from one building to the next. With my chest tight, my jaw agape, and my breath lodged in my lungs, I watched in horror as the flames ate up my unit.

"Oh, honey. That was your home. I'm so sorry," the woman stated.

Even as she wrapped her arms around me in a comforting gesture, I could find no words. I was empty inside as I watched everything that I owned in the world go up in flames.

Everything that I had left of Elijah had just been destroyed. There was nothing that I had to hold onto him any longer except for the memories.

My heart shattered in my chest as I broke down sobbing in my neighbor's arms.

"You can't stay here like that."

"I'll be fine, Genni."

"You can stay with me and Alex when we return. You know that we don't mind."

I hadn't called anyone and told them what happened. After assuring the Red Cross that I would be okay and that their focus needed to be on those who were in more need than I was, I drove across town to my office.

I was thankful that it was early enough in the morning that I didn't have to encounter anyone. I wasn't quite sure how I would explain my disheveled appearance and showing up at the office in nothing more than a nightgown and some slippers.

Thankfully, I had my purse and credit cards. I knew that I could shop online, but the things that I would immediately need wouldn't arrive in time. I had settled down to wait for Imani to arrive at the office. I would ask her to run an errand to pick up the major items that I needed to start my day. Then I would eventually wander out on my own to purchase more items.

Although I hadn't called my family to worry them in the wee hours of the morning, I had forgotten that my sister was an early riser. She always checked the news, even

when she was away from home. Although she and her husband were on a two-week vacation in Tahiti, she still checked the news back home, and she had seen the fire on the news and instantly called me.

I couldn't ignore her phone calls. Whereas my parents would be worried, and my father would rush to wherever I was to save the day, Genni would worry, but she would also respect my privacy. Thankfully, our parents had just left two days earlier on a ten-day cruise and couldn't be reached.

"No, Genni. You two have that two-bedroom condo, and he uses that as his office."

"And he's offered to let you stay in there. He can work from the living room, dining room, or his actual office."

"I appreciate your generosity, but I won't put Alex out like that. Your husband always drops everything for everyone, and I'm not allowing him to do that again."

"It's not about allowing him to, Gigi. You're family."

"I appreciate that, but I'll be fine here in my office for now."

"How? You have no place to sleep."

"My couch works just fine," I muttered, tapping my ink pen against the edge of the desk.

My eyes were gritty and bleary from the lack of sleep I had gotten.

"That's no way to live, sweetie."

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

“Trust, Sis. When I get tired of office dwelling, I’ll get a hotel room.”

“What about your insurance?”

“I’m still going through the paperwork. Once that is all completed, the insurance company will cover everything.”

“What about a rebuild?”

“No. I’m not doing that, but they will cover the expense of me moving into a new place. I have to set up an appointment with a realtor later today. I’m sure that I’ll be able to find something.”

“Do you have a realtor?”

“No.”

“I have a name for you. He’s a great guy, and he is in high demand. Do you want it?”

“Sure,” I replied softly.

“I’ll text you his number when we end the call. His name is Jude Rome, and he’s a friend of Alex’s. I know that he’ll drop everything and come assist you without a second thought.”

“I don’t want anyone doing that for me.”

“See, that’s your problem, Sis. You never allow anyone to help you. You’re always helping everyone else and being there for others. You listen to people’s problems all day and carry the burden of other people’s problems, but who do you allow to be there for you?”

I sighed but didn’t respond. My sister’s words reminded me of Casimir Perez’s words. I closed my eyes, trying to block out the way I felt when he said those things to me. The only thing I succeeded in doing was seeing his smooth dark skin, those penetrating, beautiful inky black eyes, and those thick, sexy lips. That led to me remembering our dance in the club.

I shook my head when my sister asked, “Did you hear me?”

“No.”

“I said that I’m going to send you his number, but I’m getting off the phone with you now so that I can call him. I’m not trusting you to handle this. And if you haven’t found a place when we return, you’ll be staying with us.”

“Fine,” I muttered.

“I knew that I should have made you take a copy of my key when we moved in here last year.”

“You two need your privacy. You don’t need your baby sister barging in on you.”

“And you wouldn’t have. But it would have sooo come in handy right now. You could be staying there while we’re out of town.”

“I’ll be fine, Genni.”

“I love you, sweetheart.”

“Love you too.”

I knew that I couldn't call my parents, but I did wish they were here. I knew the moment that I heard their voices, I would break. My parents always made me feel like their little girl again. My daddy's big, comforting arms and my mother's soothing words were just what I needed but more than I could handle at the moment.

I had to be strong and figure out my next move. I knew that I would be okay as it related to housing. Yes, I could check into a hotel, and yes, my insurance would cover moving expenses when I found someplace new. That wasn't what had me rocked, though.

I was devastated because I no longer had anything left to remind me of my one true love. It was as if he had never existed, as if we had never been. I felt like the universe was tired of me holding on to something that could not be and burnt it all down to the ground. Everything about him had been ripped from my hands.

It was as if the universe and God Himself were mocking me, saying, “If he didn't love you enough to stay around, why are you still holding on to him? Let him go.”

I knew that was foolish thinking, yet, even with all my education and training, nothing rang truer at the moment than I was a victim, and everything that I had left was taken from me.

I grabbed an Afghan and pillow from my closet, walked to the couch, and dropped down on it. I turned my phone on vibrate and set it on the table at the other end of the couch, and then I lay down to rest.

Casimir

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

“Yo, you want to run an errand with me right quick?” Jude asked.

I had just arrived to pick up the keys to my new condo. We were scheduled to have lunch to celebrate. Although I had closed on it, I had not moved out of Bethany’s and my home yet. We had called a truce and kept our distance from one another, with her on one side of the house and me on the other. Now, I was ready to leave Bethany and the home for good.

“Cool. Where are you headed to?”

“My boy’s wife called and asked if I’d be interested in taking on an emergency client. Apparently, her sister’s complex burned down this morning, and she has no place to go.”

“Yeah, I saw that on the news. That’s screwed. One of the residents fell asleep with the stove on, and she had some kids.”

We talked about the fire as I followed him to his car from the condos.

I had just finished doing my walk-through and accepted the keys when he stepped away to take the phone call.

“Man, I don’t know what people be thinking. It’s like, you’re putting more lives at risk than just yours when you do stupid shit like that.”

“True, JR, but I try not to judge. I mean, I’m sure she wasn’t trying to hurt her kids or leave them homeless. Who knows? Maybe she’d worked a double shift somewhere

and was tired, but she had to feed the kids. If she hadn't gotten all her rest and she was worn out, I could see that happening."

"I hear you, dawg, but still."

"Yeah, it's a fucked-up situation. That's for sure." I agreed as we pulled out of the complex.

"So, what's up with you and Beth? You legit leaving her ass?"

"The divorce is final, man."

"I thought you loved that girl, man."

"You heard Tina. What's love got to do with it?" I laughed.

He chuckled, and I continued. "I loved her, but I was never in love with her."

"Yo! Why niggas always saying that shit?"

"Because that's really a thing. I used to feel the same way that you do. You can love a woman, want what's best for her, and try to be there for her to support her and give her the world. But as far as feeling that she completes you, that she makes you better, and you can't imagine life without her . . . Yeah, I'm not feeling all that when it comes to Beth."

Jude glanced at me from the corner of his eyes. "You said 'when it comes to Beth.' Then who do you feel that way about, my nigga?"

"Nobody."

“Come on. This is me.”

“Like I said, nobody. I’m in love with myself these days. That’s why I’m doing the shit that I’m doing. The business. The condo. The divorce. It’s all about me and improving my life.”

“Nigga. How the fuck are you a millionaire a few times over and talking about improving your life?”

“Doesn’t matter how much money you get, JR. There’s always room for improvement. Besides, I don’t think . . . This is where my doctor works.” I peered out the window as we pulled into the medical complex.

“Word?”

“Yeah. Remember I told you that Beth had signed us up for marriage counseling?”

“Yeah. Clearly, that shit didn’t work.”

“Nah, she made it a joke. It appears that it was all about getting me to change. Ain’t that some bullshit?”

“Hey, women have been known to do worse,” he replied as he parked the car.

“Yeah, I guess.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

“Aye, I’m gonna run in and check to see if shorty’s ready to roll right now or if she needs some time. You wanna chill here?”

“You know what? I’m gonna drop in and check on my doctor and see how she’s doing,” I replied and climbed out of the car.

“Cool. If you make it back to the car before me, hit me up, and you can come grab the keys from me.”

I nodded and headed inside. Jude followed me and we both stood outside of the elevators.

“So, you plan on turning that condo into a bachelor pad?”

“Nah. I ain’t bringing no females where I lay my head at. I don’t need that kind of energy or trouble right now,” I declared as we stepped onto the elevator.

I pushed the button for the third floor at the same time that Jude reached for the button. He stepped back and shoved his hands in his pockets.

“So, how’s Beth handling all this shit?”

“She’s up and down. It just depends on the day, the mood, and the moment. Some days she’s cussing my ass out about it, other days, she’s ignoring me, and then there are some days that she’s begging me to stay.”

“As long as you’re in the same crib, she’s gonna think she’s still got her hooks in

you. That piece of paper doesn't mean shit if you're in the same space, and she can manipulate you."

"Yeah, that's why I'm getting out," I muttered and pulled my fingers through my beard as I thought about the night before.

Beth had slipped into the bed with me and tried to suck me off. The elevator bell dinged, and I stepped out of the car and headed down the hall.

"I'll see you in a minute," I called as he stood in the middle of the hall, checking his phone for something.

"Aye, I'm heading in the same direction you are. What's your doctor's name again?" he asked as I pulled the glass doors open.

"Dr. Giselle Champagne."

"Word? That's the lady I'm coming to see."

My heart dropped. No fucking way that Giselle had lost all her shit in that fire. I saw the extent of the damage done to the building on the news. I heard the reporter say that there wasn't anything salvageable for the affected units.

I turned to Imani who sat behind the desk on a phone call. She looked up at me with inquisitive eyes before looking beyond me at Jude. She held up a finger while she finished her phone call, and it took everything in me to stay put. I wanted to rush through the doors and see Giselle with my own eyes. I wanted to make sure that she was okay.

Always being strong and being there for others. Again, I wondered who the hell was there for her.

“Hi, Mr. Perez. I don’t have you on the calendar for an appointment today.”

“I didn’t have one.”

“I’m sorry. Dr. Champagne has cleared her calendar for today. She’s not taking any patients.”

“Good,” I replied. “I’m here as a friend.”

She frowned, and Jude stepped forward. “Hi, Ms. Yancy,” he stated, looking at the nameplate on her desk. He extended his hand, and she took it and smiled flirtatiously. “I’m Jude Rome, a friend of his, and I was sent by Dr. Champagne’s sister, Genevieve.”

“Oh, yes, the realtor. She’s been expecting you,” Imani stated and picked up the phone once again.

When I looked at Jude, he beamed at me, and I wanted to knock the smile off that nigga’s face. Imani walked from behind her desk, and we followed her back to Giselle’s office. She knocked, and then I could faintly hear Giselle call out, “Come in.”

“Dr. Champagne, Mr. Roman, the realtor, is here. And also, Mr.—”

“Giselle, are you okay?” I asked, pushing past both Jude and a startled Imani. Giselle’s eyes flew to my face, and shock was etched on hers.

“Casim—” She didn’t finish calling my first name before she looked up and noticed that both Imani and Carter were staring at her.

“Uhm, Mr. Perez, I’m not taking patients today.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

I noticed that her voice sounded somewhat scratchy and low, as though she was exhausted and hadn't gotten any sleep.

"I didn't come for an appointment."

Her eyes pleaded with me not to say anything more, and I wouldn't say anything in front of her receptionist that was liable to get her in trouble. But I was saved from saying anything the moment that Jude spoke up.

"Oh, he's with me. Cas and I are good friends, and we were together finishing a deal when I got the call from your sister."

"Oh," Giselle mumbled as she broke her stare with me.

She looked as if we had interrupted her in the middle of something. There were shopping bags on the low coffee table in front of the couch that I normally occupied and on the floor.

"Thank you, Imani. Would you please lock up and forward all calls to voicemail? You may leave for the remainder of the day."

"Are you sure?" Imani asked.

"I'm sure. I won't be doing anything else here today or tomorrow. Thanks again for everything," Giselle stated to Imani with a warm and grateful smile.

"Anytime. That's what friends are for," Imani replied before she backed out of the

office and closed the door behind her.

“Dr. Champagne, was this a bad time for me to come?” Jude asked.

“No. Your timing is fine,” Giselle answered as she stood and wiped her hands down the front of her fitted fuchsia-colored slacks. “I was just going through some items and sorting things out is all.”

“I’m so sorry about the loss of your home and the damages that you incurred,” Jude expressed.

“Thank you.”

“JR, can we have a minute, please?” I asked.

I hadn’t taken my eyes off her since I stepped foot in her office, and I noticed that she had trouble keeping her eyes off me too.

“Yeah. I need to take a call anyway. I’ll be out in your lobby when you’re ready, Dr. Champagne,” Jude stated.

“That’s fine. Thank you,” Giselle replied softly.

I waited until he stepped out of the office and closed the door behind him.

I sat on the couch beside her and took her hands into mine.

“Giselle, I saw it on the news this morning, but I had no idea that it was you. I’m so sorry. Were you injured? Are you okay?” I asked, peering into her eyes.

She pulled her hands free from mine and broke down crying. I immediately reached

out and pulled her into my arms. She fit so perfectly in them, and the warm brown sugar and coffee scent that emanated from her made me want to taste her.

Instead, I controlled my desires and just held her while rubbing her back softly. I let her get it all out because I suspected that she needed this. And it made me wonder again who she went to with her problems. Who was that shoulder that she could lean on in times of trouble?

After a couple of minutes, Giselle pulled back and apologized. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to break down on you that way. It's just that it's been so difficult, and it's been such a long day."

"Don't apologize, love. This wasn't your fault. I'm sure that you've had plenty of shit to deal with today. Anyone in your shoes would do the same, if not worse."

She wiped her eyes, and I reached behind me to grab a tissue from a box that always sat on the corner table. I dabbed at her eyes and then stopped as I stared into them, and she stared into mine.

I didn't know who moved first, me or her. I swear I didn't. But I would look back on this moment later and realize that I had no regrets. My thumbs and fingers caressed her jawline, and our gazes remained locked until the moment that our lips touched.

Hers were soft and plump and smelled of peppermint. I wasn't sure if it was the lip gloss that she wore or if it was something she ate, because her breath held that same fresh, sweet scent. I licked her lips, unable to resist the temptation. She tasted like peppermint too.

I nipped at her bottom lip, and she moaned underneath my touch. My dick grew hard and restless in my pants, but I willed it to calm down. Unfortunately, it stayed at attention, and I didn't want to let go of the kiss. I didn't want the moment to end.

She had me feeling like a sophomore with a crush on the captain of the varsity cheerleading squad.

I pulled back. “My bad. I had no right to take advantage of you that way.”

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

She shook her head, and she stated, “You didn’t take advantage of me.”

My finger wiped around the corners of her mouth, and our foreheads remained pressed together for a few seconds longer.

“I feel like I did. But I also felt like it was fate that brought me here today.”

She pulled back and stared into my eyes.

“Why? There’s nothing that you can do about this. My townhome is gone, along with it all the memories . . .”

“What memories?” She shook her head. “Tell me. You’ll find that I’m a great listener.”

“No. It’s okay.”

“It’s not, really. I want to hear about it. I told you, Giselle. You need someone you can lean on in times of trouble too. You need to be able to share the load with someone and not take it all on yourself.”

“Don’t you have a business you need to be running, Casimir?” Giselle asked.

“No. I’m where I’m supposed to be,” I replied.

Before she could respond, a knock sounded at the door.

“Hey, just checking to make sure everything is okay,” Jude stated, sticking his head through the doorway. He was mugging the shit out of me, and I knew that it was his warning for me to tread lightly.

“Yeah. We’re good.” I couldn’t hide the irritation in my tone, and he knew it based on his smirk.

“We were just getting ready to call you back in,” Giselle declared, and I knew the moment was over.

Giselle

Thank God Jude came back into the room when he did. I had no business kissing Casimir Perez, no matter how distraught I was. But it was hard to fight the attraction whenever I was in his presence.

When Jude returned, he had a laptop that he must have brought from the car. He used it to show me several listings. I was pleased with each of them online, but he said that I needed to see them in person. I wasn’t too fond of the asking price for two of them, but I was certain that we could work something out.

Once we narrowed it down to three places, we headed out to see them. Casimir found something wrong with each place, but finally, Jude had advised him that he wouldn’t be the one renting, buying, or living in the place. In the end, I didn’t find anything that I liked.

“I know that I might seem picky, but I promise you that I’m not, Jude. I just know that when I find the perfect spot, I will know it. I don’t want to choose a place just because I’m inconvenienced right now. I don’t want to pick something because it’s the best deal or whatever, and then later, I’ll be stuck with the property that I bought out of desperation.”

“I promise that I won’t let you do that,” Jude stated. “Let me show you a couple of other places for tonight.”

“Not tonight. I’m sorry. I’m too tired. I appreciate all the time that you spent on me, but can we put it off for another day or so? Or whenever you have time to do another showing,” I suggested.

“Sure. Whatever works for you.”

“Thank you,” I replied softly.

“Where are you staying in the meantime?” Casimir asked.

I looked away because I didn’t want to say that I was staying in my office.

“No. You’re not doing that.” It was like he read my mind.

“Casimir, I’m fine, really.”

Jude looked back and forth between us. I wondered what all he knew about Casimir’s marriage.

“No. You’re not. I’m not about to let you sleep in your office and on that couch where people’s asses have been. It’s not safe or sanitary.”

“I cover it with blankets, and it is very much safe. No one knows that I’m here.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

“Giselle, there was a break-in at the office complex across the street just last week,” Casimir argued.

“Which is why they’ve beefed up security.” I pleaded my case because I didn’t know where he was going with all of this, but I knew that I didn’t need or want him involved in my situation.

“Although I’m reluctant to admit it, Dr. Champagne, I agree with Cas. But the two of you can argue this later,” Jude broke in as he looked at his watch. “In the meantime, let’s go check out one last property. I know that you said you’re tired, but I have one I’m sure you’ll love. Please.”

“Sure.” I agreed reluctantly.

I felt Casimir’s penetrating gaze on me the entire time. Every facial expression and every attitude felt as if it were under a microscope.

The three of us rode in Jude’s Lexus SUV, and the entire drive was filled with Jude’s chatter as he attempted to break the strain and tension between Casimir and me. There shouldn’t have been any. After all, he had been my patient, and I had been his doctor. There was no way that he should have been involved with this process at all, but unfortunately, he was.

We toured the next property, and though it was beautiful, it was above my price point.

“I have an idea,” Casimir stated as we left the final property.

I was beyond frustrated, and though I did not act it out, I was certain that they could tell by the look on my face. I wasn't disappointed about the search but about my situation.

"What's that?" Jude asked, looking into the rearview mirror at Casimir, who was seated in the back seat.

"Head over to The Vista."

"Cas, if sh—"

"Nigga, do what I said," Casimir demanded.

Throughout the day, I saw another side of Casimir that I'd never experienced before. Although Jude attempted to keep up professional appearances for my sake, there was only so much acting he could do when the two men interacted.

They both spoke slang a lot when speaking with each other, and then they reverted to a more professional and cultured way of speaking when they spoke to me. But this was the first time that I heard either of them say the word nigga so casually. And it was even more surprising how Jude fell in with the flow of it, not questioning it or correcting Casimir. In fact, he went right along with whatever Casimir suggested that he wanted him to do.

Fifteen minutes later, we pulled up to a gorgeous glass and chrome building with valet parking and professionally landscaped grounds, complete with a doorman and a front desk reception.

"Why are we going here?" I asked as we stepped inside of the building, and both Jude and Casimir waved casually at the front desk staff.

“I don’t know. I guess Mr. Perez’s going to tell us that soon,” Jude replied sarcastically with an eye roll at his friend.

Jude pushed the button for the elevator, and the car arrived immediately. I watched as he pushed the button for the twentieth floor.

“Are there offices here?” I asked.

There was no way they were taking me to see any residences in this place. This building wasn’t something that I could afford on my best day. I had seen the construction of this place, and there was so much hype in the community when they’d first started, and there was a huge party when it was completed.

I could only dream of living someplace like this, and I wondered who lived here.

“There are some offices here,” Jude said slowly but coolly. I wondered what he wasn’t saying.

He stood with his head down, his hands shoved in his pockets, and then shook his head. Alternatively, Casimir stood closest to the back wall with his head tilted back and a firm set to his jaw. It was as if he was determined to go through with whatever was in his mind, no matter who said what.

When the elevator came to a stop, the doors opened, and both men stepped off and held their arms out to keep the door open. They waited as I stepped off the elevator, and then Casimir confidently strode off to the right, and Jude brought up the rear.

I waited while Casimir unlocked a door at the end of the hallway and held the door open for me to step inside. I walked into a beautiful marble foyer with a crystal chandelier overhead. The space was bright and airy.

“Go ahead. Walk through,” Casimir stated.

“I don’t understand.”

“Check out the space. Feel free to walk through every room,” Casimir encouraged me.

I looked between both men, and Jude simply nodded, encouraging me to do what Casimir requested. I walked further into the residence, noting the beautiful lines of architecture within the home and how the polished marble surfaces, glass, chrome, and wood materials all blended seamlessly to create an upscale modern space.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

Large floor-to-ceiling windows gave a sweeping panoramic view of the city and the springs beyond. Upscale appliances, marble counters, a large marble island, and gorgeous hardwood floors created a state-of-the-art kitchen and keeping room.

I moved from the kitchen to the dining room and beyond to the den and then the bedrooms before I finally returned to the living room, where the two men were arguing. Throughout the time I walked around the penthouse, I could hear their low voices, and it seemed as if they were having a heated argument, but the moment that I stepped back into view, they instantly stopped.

“It’s a beautiful space. Massive. High end. I’m sure it’s pricey, so I’m not sure why I’m being shown this particular property. It’s fully furnished already. Even the bathroom is stocked with linens. Whose place is this?” I asked, looking between the two men.

“Yours if you want it,” Casimir stated boldly, those dark, flashing eyes holding my gaze.

Jude cleared his throat, but other than that, he said nothing.

“Excuse me?” I asked, looking at Casimir as if he’d just lost his mind.

“Dr. Champagne, my friend, though it seems he’s lost his mind—his proposal makes sense. He closed on this place a week ago and had it furnished according to his specifications, including down to the linens and cookware. The company he hired finished the job yesterday, and he just received the keys this morning. He’s offering you a place to stay during your transition.”

“What is this? A joke? I can’t stay here,” I stated and immediately turned away and headed for the front door.

Casimir was quick. He moved behind me and grabbed my arm, and I steeled myself against his touch. Though my back was still to him, I could feel his gaze on me. I was familiar with the liquid desire that I knew was in his eyes, and I could feel how desperately he wanted to crush my lips with his.

I closed my eyes briefly to regain control before I pulled free from his grip and turned around to face him.

“It’s not a joke, Giselle. You have no idea what you’ve done for me. There is no way that I could ever repay you for what you’ve given me.”

“I haven’t given you anything.”

For a moment, I think we both forgot that Jude was there as we became engaged in an intimate back-and-forth.

“You’ve given me everything. My freedom, my strength, and my courage. All those were things that I had lost in the last few years, Giselle.”

“I did my job, Casimir. I tried to help you and Bethany navigate the tumultuous waters of your marriage. But I failed.”

“No, you didn’t. You helped me to see the truth and restored my courage to face that truth. My independence from that family is the only way that I can get back to the heart of the man I once was. That marriage was a farce, and we were only holding on to it because of the look it gave us within the community.”

“You are my patient—”

“Stop saying that,” Casimir bit out that last word through clenched teeth as his jaw worked overtime.

“Well, it’s true.”

“It’s not. I’m your former client. We no longer have that doctor-client relationship, and you know this. Stop treating me like you have to . . .”

“Have to what, Casimir? Keep professional boundaries intact? Maintain a distance between what is expected within the medical community and what you seem to be seeking?”

“Do you even know what that is?” he asked in a hushed voice that sounded as if he held some pain. But that could not be. Nothing had occurred between us more than a couple of kisses. It wasn’t like we’d had a relationship at some point.

“It doesn’t matter. I can’t do this,” I replied and swept my arms around the penthouse.

“You could. You’re just being too stubborn.”

“What is it that you expect from me, Casimir?” I scoffed.

“Listen, just stay here until you get someplace that is suitable for you while JR works on something more affordable and suitable for your needs.”

I shook my head. “I cannot—”

“You can,” he stated forcefully.

Jude stepped up beside Casimir, bringing our attention back to the fact that we weren’t alone. And I was grateful for that because I was getting lost in Casimir’s

overwhelming presence.

“Listen. How about you stay here for the interim, as Cas suggested. And I’ll work hard on finding you what you need.”

“One day at a time,” Casimir suggested.

“It’s a short-term solution at best,” Jude interjected. “I mean, to his point, it isn’t safe for you to remain in your office. I’m sure the amenities aren’t comparable to this place,” he joked.

I sighed and crossed my arms over my chest. “And where will you stay?”

“Same place I’ve been staying.”

“Which is where?”

“With Bethany.”

For some reason, those words hurt me. I thought Casimir divorced Bethany. I thought that things were over between them. I had no right to ask the questions that I wanted to ask, and I definitely would not do that in front of Jude.

“If you don’t trust him, Dr. Champagne, trust me,” Jude stated.

“I don’t know,” I hedged.

“It can’t hurt,” Jude encouraged. “Hey, follow me. I’d like to show you a few things.”

I didn’t miss the smile on Jude’s face nor the look of relief in Casimir’s eyes when the two men exchanged a look.

“Fine.” I followed Jude out, and Casimir was right on our heels. We spent the next half an hour with Jude showing me all the amenities The Vista had to offer.

Casimir

One Week Later

It hadn't taken much to get Giselle moved into my penthouse suite at The Vista. She didn't have much to bring with her since she had lost everything in the fire.

I hadn't seen her in the week since she had moved in. I had received a simple “Thank you” text from her, but I knew she needed her space, which was why I hadn't bothered to visit. Besides, I recalled the painful look in her eyes when I told her that I would be staying with Beth and had been staying with her. Jude had commented on the sexual chemistry between Giselle and me after we had dropped her back off to pick up her car.

I gave her the spare key and had her name added to the residence so that she wouldn't have a problem coming or going or seeking any assistance that she might need. She emphasized that it was only a temporary arrangement. Thankfully, Jude had been caught up that first week with other clients he was already working with, and this week, he was heading out of town to a seminar and wouldn't be back until next week.

I looked at my watch and smiled. I was certain that Giselle would be home this evening. I only hoped that she didn't have any company. I didn't know much about Giselle's personal life, but I doubted she would bring another man up there. She didn't seem like the disrespectful type, but still I was taking a chance visiting her unannounced.

I pushed the doorbell. Although I still had a key to this place, I knew that using it was the quickest way to have her pack up and leave.

I pushed it a second time, and when she finally opened it, she stared up at me in confusion.

“Hey. What are you doing here? Is everything okay?”

She was gorgeous in a soft peach loungewear set. The top barely brushed the top of her navel, and I could see that she had a belly piercing. The shorts were short enough to expose a butterfly on her upper right thigh, and I could only imagine if she turned around that I might catch a glimpse of that fat peach.

I held my hands up with the two bags that I carried.

“I came bearing gifts.”

She sniffed the air, and a light smile crossed her lips.

“It smells delicious.”

“I’m hoping that it is.”

She opened the door wider, and I stepped inside. “Did you already cook?” I asked.

“No. I’m actually starving and was thinking about ordering takeout. I haven’t had time to cook because I’ve been working on some case notes.”

I followed her into the den, where she had her laptop set up, a bright blue cashmere blanket, and several folders. There was a glass of juice sitting on a coaster on the table. The TV was on over the fireplace, but it was muted.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

“Sorry about the mess. I was just—”

“No apologies. Your mess, as you call it, is actually very organized and controlled. Besides, you’re at home. I’m the one infringing on your personal time.”

“Temporarily.”

“Huh?”

“It’s my temporary home,” she explained as I sat down.

“I’ll be right back. What would you like to drink? Water? Juice? Wine? Beer?”

“Water will be fine.”

I set the food out as she disappeared into the kitchen. When she returned with napkins, forks, and bottled water, she took a chair opposite me.

“I haven’t heard from Jude much since you’ve been gone.”

“Yeah, he had to go out of town for some seminar,” I explained.

“Mm . . .”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked as I uncovered the lid on my platter.

I had picked up some food from Off The Bone. They were a barbeque joint that

served a variety of barbeque along with all the fixings.

“It’s awfully convenient how he was able to drop everything to come running to my rescue when my sister called. But now that you’re involved, things suddenly came to a halt.”

“Is that what you think?”

“Mm-hmm,” she replied as she licked some barbeque sauce from her fingertips. “He was out of pocket at first because of pressing issues with clients whom he put on hold for me. And now he’s out of town at a seminar. Just saying, it’s mighty convenient in keeping me here in your place.”

“It could look like that, but trust me, my homie’s a nig—man of integrity if nothing else.”

“It’s okay, Casimir. You don’t have to do that,” she stated as she removed the top from her container of collard greens.

“Do what?”

“Alter your speech for me. You’re in your home . . . or a place that you own, I should say.”

I chuckled. “You caught that, huh?”

“Yeah. You present yourself in one light around me. I would dare say that it’s this altered version that you said your in-laws created. A façade that you feel pressured to uphold in the presence of some.”

“Some like who?” I asked.

“Those who have ties to your wife and in-laws.”

“And you think that you have those ties?”

“Not like that,” she denied and forked some potato salad. “I mean, people you met through them or because of them in some way. Like, take me for instance. If your wife hadn’t insisted that you come to marriage counseling and hadn’t made the appointment, you wouldn’t know me,” she explained before shoveling the potato salad into her mouth.

I bit into my rib and nodded. I took my time chewing before I answered. “You’re right.”

“And you shouldn’t have to do that, especially in a place that belongs to you. I mean, you did tell me that was why you were leaving her, right? Because you wanted to be yourself again.”

“I did.”

“Then do nothing less than that no matter who you’re around. Be yourself when you’re around me too.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:11 am

We ate in silence for a little while longer before she spoke up. “I have a question.”

“What’s that?”

“Where did you go?”

“What do you mean?”

“I remember that you said that you were leaving her and that you’d filed for divorce. Where did you move to if you didn’t come here? Isn’t that what you purchased this place for?”

“It was.”

“So, where are you?”

“At home still.”

“With Bethany?”

“Yes.”

She set her fork down and nodded. I watched as she lifted her glass to her lips and took a sip. I knew that I wasn’t mistaken. She was clearly disappointed with that shit, knowing that I remained in the house with my wife.

“Are you okay?” I asked after a couple of minutes. She lifted her laptop back onto her

lap and typed as if she didn't have a plateful of food sitting there that she'd just been throwing down on.

"Yes. Why?" Giselle asked, not looking up at me.

"Because you just quit eating all out of the blue."

"Oh, I'm okay."

I stood and walked to the kitchen. After I washed my hands, I returned to the den and sat beside her. I removed the laptop from her lap.

"What are you doing, Casimir? Please give that back to me."

"No. You can work later. We're talking now."

"You can't just take my stuff and force me to do what you want me to do."

"I can, and I did."

She sat back with her legs crisscrossed and folded beneath her on the couch. My eyes dropped to those thick, beautiful thighs, and she grabbed her Afghan and pulled it over her lap. I snatched it, and she gripped the edge, not wanting to let it go.

We played tug-of-war for a second before I snatched it completely out of her hand and tossed it aside.

"Fine. What is it that you want to talk about?" Giselle crossed her arms underneath her breasts and pushed them up further.

"I want to know what was that all about just then. You looked like you were in your

feelings about me saying that I was still at the house with Beth.”

“I did not get in my feelings.”

“Why’d you stop eating?”

“I have work to do.”

“Yeah, but you hadn’t finished eating.”

“I was done, Casimir. Okay?”

“No, you weren’t. Talk to me. Tell me what’s going on in that beautiful mind of yours.”

Page 47

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

“I have a ton of work to do, and I wasn’t expecting company. Okay?”

“Damn. Mood ruined just like that, huh?”

She rolled her eyes and sighed. “I already knew that you were still there the day that you showed me this place. I hoped that I misunderstood, but I guess I didn’t.”

“Does it matter?”

“Of course it does.”

“Why?”

She turned away from me and shook her head. I gripped her chin and turned her face toward me.

Giselle huffed out a sigh.

“Talk to me, beautiful.”

“What do you want, Casimir?”

“I want to know what you’re feeling.”

“I’m feeling confused and crazy, okay? Like, why am I playing this game with you? Why am I sitting up in your house? Why are you still with your wife and you have me here? Does she even know that I’m here? Why am I here? What is it that you

want from me?”

“You.”

“Cas—”

“Shh,” I whispered and placed my finger over her lips for a moment before I replaced it with my lips.

Giselle and I engaged in several lip-smacking pecks before I cupped the back of her neck and lifted her onto my lap.

“Mmm.” Giselle whimpered underneath my kiss.

I sucked at her lips until she opened them for me and allowed my tongue to enter. She was hungry, greedy even for my kisses, as she could barely allow me to lead. She sucked eagerly at my tongue as she moaned and whimpered, and soon, she threw her arms around my neck.

I pulled back from the kiss, but just enough to put space between our lips and not between us. Our foreheads rested gently against one another’s, and I dragged my hand away from the back of her neck and down her arms. Our fingers clutched and locked with one another’s.

“She’s not my wife. Beth is my ex-wife whom I happen to still live with.”

“What are we doing?” She whispered so softly in the quiet room that I strained to hear her voice.

“Getting to know each other, Giselle, and I like it.”

“It’s scaring me . . . these feelings that I feel for you. And they’re so wrong.”

“Stop overthinking shit. Just let go and feel, Giselle.”

“I can’t. You belong to another woman.”

“No, I don’t. You know that better than anyone.”

“I know what you tell me.”

“If you were any other woman, I would agree, but it’s you. You saw the destruction Beth was willing to cause. You saw the hatred that lives in her. That’s not what I want. I want you.”

“But you’re still living with her.”

“We’re divorced.”

“That’s what you tell me.”

“I wouldn’t lie to you.”

She sighed. “I’m not ready anyway,” Giselle responded and pulled back.

“What do you mean you’re not ready?”

She started to get up, but I grabbed her wrist and tugged her back down onto my lap. Rubbing the back of her neck, I commanded, “Tell me.”

“There’s nothing left to tell.”

“It’s been five years, Giselle. It’s okay to love again.”

“No. I’m just not ready.”

I leaned forward again, and I asked, “Do you remember when I asked who was there for you? Who gave you a shoulder to lean on? Let me be that for you, Giselle.”

“No. It’s wrong, Casimir. You are . . . were my patient. And you’re still living with your ex-wife. I can’t come between that.”

“You’re not,” I admitted gruffly. “I can move out. Do you remember when I told you that Beth’s father didn’t want us to get a divorce, but he didn’t want her to drag it out in court?”

Giselle nodded.

“That was because he knew if Beth dragged it out in court, it would become a distraction and fodder for his opponents to use against him. He only asked for one thing from me. And that was for me to remain in the house until the campaign was finished. I agreed.”

“But where will you go?”

“I can get another place.”

“But you have this place here.”

“You want me to stay here with you?” I asked, smirking.

She sighed. “That’s not what I’m saying. I feel like this is my fault, though.”

“Why? Because she blamed you?” I asked as she climbed off me with her back to me.

Giselle turned around and faced me. The fire that sparked from her eyes was hot enough to singe me.

“No, because I caught feelings for you long before you and Bethany decided to give up on the marriage and divorce her. I had feelings for you before she decided that counseling wasn’t working,” Giselle confessed softly.

My heart flickered to life for the first time. It was a small fire, but it was there, burning brightly with hope, possibilities, and love. And as scared as I was to ask my next question for fear her answer might douse that flame, I had to ask it anyway.

I stood. “Then what’s keeping us apart now?”

“My license, Casimir. If anyone finds out, I could lose my license! I cannot do that. I worked too hard to get to where I am.”

“No one has to know.”

“So, I’ll just be what? Your secret lover?”

“No! That’s not what I meant, Giselle.”

“But that’s exactly what I would become, Casimir. I think you should leave,” Giselle announced.

“Why?”

“Because I need some space from you. I’m overwhelmed by your presence. I know that I’m not thinking clearly right now because I want to let you in, and I know that if I do, I can never get you out. I’m thinking with my heart and not my mind. Truth is, we’re no good for each other. Please, just leave.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

She stalked off and headed down the hallway. I still wasn't sure how to convince her that she belonged to me, but I would find a way.

Casimir

“ . . . s

igned all the documents, and the acquisition is complete.” I had only heard the tail end of that statement because my mind was a million miles away.

I stared out the expansive glass window over the city, and from my view, I could see The Vista. That was one of the reasons that I decided to purchase a penthouse in the condominium building. Although Jude had shown me all the amenities and his argument had been persuasive, it was simply because I could see that building from most places in Downtown Cherokee Springs.

Although I didn't plan to be here much longer, it was still nice that I could temporarily see what would become my home.

“Sir, did you hear me?”

“I uh . . . Yes, Monica. I heard you.”

“Would you like me to schedule the meeting so that you all can begin to discuss transition details?”

“If possible, make it next Tuesday.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Have a good day, Monica.”

“You, too, sir.”

“Oh, and Monica?”

“Yes?”

“Please, call me Casimir.”

“Oh . . .” I could tell by the way she responded that she was startled and caught off guard. But if I was going to discard this persona that I’d allowed to be crafted, then I was going all the way. In some ways, I knew that I could never completely get back to my old self. I had seen too much and been through too much ever to be that man again. But I didn’t have to be who they said I was, either.

“Thanks, Monica.”

“You’re welcome . . . Casimir.”

I could even hear the smile in her voice as she spoke my name. I ended the call and sighed. The sun was going down, and the lights were coming on all over the city to signal the day’s end. I wasn’t looking forward to heading home as hundreds of thousands of people around the city were. I had nothing to look forward to. But if I were to head to that building that I could see across the way, I knew that happiness would be waiting for me.

I had just completed the acquisition of The Apex Hotel and pulled it into my portfolio with my travel company, Atlas Dreams, and two other hotels that I owned, The

Pinnacle and Edgewater. From the moment that I married into the Huffington-Bradwell family, I had begun to etch out the plan to acquire my dreams. I knew that I didn't want to be under their thumb for long.

I started the fledgling travel agency a little over four years ago, and I turned it into one of the top travel agencies in the country. But I held it under an umbrella company, C.A.P. Those were my initials, and not a single soul knew that I owned the company or anything under its umbrella. I wanted it to stay that way.

The way that I moved from the moment that I took those vows with Bethany was to secure my future. I didn't trust her and especially her father and grandfather. If they sunk my battleship, I needed to make sure that I had a lifeboat to save me. Only, that lifeboat had turned from a lifeboat to a cruise ship, and today's final acquisition secured my position.

I glanced at my watch and realized that it was time to go home whether I wanted to or not. It was time to let Beth know that I was moving out. I planned to announce my resignation from Glenco in a few weeks. That was sure to shake the foundation and make heads roll. I wanted to do it in a way that wouldn't have a huge impact on their stocks. But if they gave me hell, I would give them terror.

"What do you think you're doing, Casimir?"

I turned and spotted Beth standing in my doorway.

"What does it look like?"

She scoffed and shook her head. "It's time for you to stop this foolishness. You're not going anywhere."

I sighed and ran my hand over my head. "Did you forget that we're divorced?"

She shrugged. “So. People do it all the time. But then they remarry, or they remain divorced and just live together. We’re no different than anyone else.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.”

“You’ve stayed here all this time. What’s changed now?”

“I have a place.”

“Are you seriously leaving?”

“I told you that I was when the divorce was finalized.”

“You promised my father you would stay here in the house.”

“I did, but it’s become unbearable. You had to know the way you’ve made my life miserable since then that I would leave.”

“But you never did. I thought you were having a tantrum about our different positions on having a child.”

“No, Beth. I’m just ready to move on with my life.”

“And what about me, Cas?”

“What about you, Beth? You’ve got everything that you ever wanted.”

“I didn’t have a happy marriage.”

“That’s because you weren’t interested in a happy marriage.”

I regretted the words the moment that I spoke them. I knew that look in her eyes and the way she leaned against the doorway. Beth's fingers went to the buttons of her blouse, and she slowly unhooked each one. She licked her lips as she sauntered into the bedroom.

"Listen, just go to bed."

"Why can't I go to bed with my husband?" she asked as she unclasped her bra and displayed perfectly pert titties.

Beth had always been a beautiful woman, and though she was tiny, she was shapely. She knew how to woo a man, and she was the epitome of a sexy siren. She wielded sex as a weapon and used it to control me at her whim.

When she walked up to me and reached for my zipper, I pushed her hand away. She looked hurt, but only briefly as she grabbed it again and then tried to jerk it down. I gripped her wrist and squeezed it tightly until she cried out, "You're hurting me."

"Leave."

She released my hand and then kneeled before me. Her hands gripped my thighs, and her mouth hovered only inches from my erection. Though my mind said no, my body growled yes. It had been four months since I last had sex. And then only because she decided to use it as another method of control. That time she had wanted me to attend a fundraising luncheon.

Beth dished out sex the way the mother of toddlers dished out snacks to quiet her rambunctious kids. I was done being her toy.

"Stop, Beth," I grunted out.

I needed to feel her on me. My body desired to have her and to release the nut that hung low but demanded to rise and spew out.

Her fingers expertly pulled my zipper down, and before I knew it, she had my dick in her mouth. I was lost and weak. I grabbed her face and pumped into her mouth repeatedly, fast, and hard until my semen spewed down her throat.

Beth smiled up at me and asked, “Was that so hard?”

The disgust that I felt about her and my actions coursed through me, and it forced me to reach down and lift her. She giggled, mistaking my movement for affection. I carried her out of the room and down the hallway to the main master suite.

“You’re coming back to our bedroom,” she whispered as she kissed my neck.

As I stepped over the threshold of the room we once shared, Beth rested her head against my chest. I tossed her onto the bed and glared at her. I pulled my wallet out of my pocket and grabbed a few singles.

“The next time I need a whore, I’ll call a professional escort. Thank you for your services,” I snarled and tossed the dollar bills at her.

I turned around and left the room just as she threw something at the door and screamed bloody murder. I knew there was no way that I would get rest tonight. She immediately came after me, shouting and hitting me. I grabbed the few bags I had managed to pack, along with my keys, my wallet, and my phone, and I headed to the garage.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

She continued to scream as she grabbed my golf clubs. I had just cleared the doorway when she landed the first hit to the back of my windshield. The next hit landed on my bumper. Before she could get another hit off, I floored it down the driveway and away from the place I had called home for the last several years.

My mind turned to the one place that I wanted to be. The one place where I knew happiness resided.

Giselle & Casimir

GISELLE

I had an excellent night's sleep last night. For some reason, I felt more relaxed than I had in a long while, despite the fact that the day before, the insurance company had called me requesting more forms be completed and any pictures that I had submitted. What part of everything burned in the fire didn't they understand? No, I had no pictures of the items I owned on my phone because who went around taking pictures of shit like that?

Last night, I decided to let it go and relax. And I had. I woke up feeling much better this morning. I was going to go into the office at nine instead of my usual seven. That was the other thing. I allowed myself to sleep in until seven instead of waking at five.

I stood at the stove and flipped the bacon just as the coffee timer went off. I checked the oven to see if my biscuits were close to being ready because I didn't trust the timer. I had a can of six, and I would take some into the office for Imani. I wasn't about to eat six biscuits. I didn't like leftovers, and I didn't want to throw them away.

Just as I closed the oven door and stood up, I heard a sound behind me that caused me to turn around, jump, and then scream.

“Oh shit! What are you doing here? You scared the hell out of me. What are you doing here?”

Casimir chuckled at my reaction. He was so gorgeous in the early morning, despite the rumpled dress shirt and wrinkled slacks he wore. Despite the beautiful smile on his face, his eyes looked tired.

“Didn’t know you were a curser. Are you good?”

“I don’t know,” I replied with a hand pressed against my chest.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you, but you’ve got the TV up somewhat loud, and I tried calling your name so that I didn’t startle you, but I managed to do that anyway.”

“Yeah. What are you doing here?” I repeated.

“I needed someplace to go last night, and I didn’t want to bother going to a hotel.”

“Oh. Uhm, do you need me to leave? Because I can get a hotel until Jude returns, and we work something out.”

“Why would you do that? I told you that this was your place.”

“Clearly yours too, if you can come in here whenever you want.”

He scratched the back of his neck, and his neck muscles flexed. Because his shirt was unbuttoned, I could see his abs through the cotton undershirt that he wore.

“Yeah, about that. I shouldn’t have taken advantage like that. Things were just so . . .” He sighed and broke off as his eyes wandered around the kitchen but never back to me. My heart broke just a little for him. I had no idea what he’d been going through, and after all, this was his place no matter what he or I said.

“Hey, it’s okay. I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to be rude. You just scared me, and I instantly went on the defensive because I’m in your home.”

Casimir stepped inside the kitchen, and his nostrils flared, his eyes narrowed, and he looked like a hunter stalking its prey. My heart thudded loudly and out of control in my chest.

“Stop saying that.”

“What?”

“That you’re in my home. It’s your home too.”

“I . . .”

“Giselle. We’re two grown adults. People have roommates all the time. I think we can handle living here in this home together, no matter how temporary, until we both figure something out. Don’t you?”

“What? Think that we can live here amicably?”

“Yes.”

“I do. It’s not that.”

“Then what is it?”

I shook my head and mumbled, “It’s nothing.”

“No, tell me.”

“Nothing.”

“What’s wrong? Are you scared that I’m gonna devour your little ass?” he asked and closed the distance between us.

I shivered and nodded. Yep. That was exactly what I was afraid of.

“Don’t worry. I’ll only do what you allow me to, and I’ll enjoy watching you enjoy it.”

I crossed my legs, one over the other, and then gripped the edge of the counter to remain upright. Because, boy, he was doing a number on my senses and my core. My pussy was growing wetter by the moment, the longer he stared at me and the more I felt surrounded by his presence.

I knew this was a bad idea, coming to stay in his place. Yet, I chose to do it, so that was on me.

Casimir placed his index finger underneath my chin and tilted my head back. He stared into my eyes, smirked, and then said, “Breathe.”

I released the breath that I hadn't known that I was holding, just as he turned around and walked out of the kitchen. How in the hell would I survive being in this place with him?

CASIMIR

I baked chicken and smothered it in a mushroom gravy sauce. I also made some quinoa, roasted asparagus, and bruschetta. I set the table when Erica from the front desk buzzed me and told me that Giselle had arrived.

I knew that she was skittish after our morning encounter, so I decided to work from home today, with my focus being on my business rather than on Glenco. Working from home would prevent me from getting held up at the office and also make sure that I didn't miss her in case she came home and ran back out or locked herself in her bedroom to avoid me.

Around four thirty, I stopped work to cook. As the hours ticked by, I worried that Giselle wouldn't return home at all. I wondered if she'd gone to stay with a friend to avoid returning here to me.

When nine o'clock hit, I had given up hope. Just as I started to put things away, Erica buzzed me at 9:03 and stated that Giselle was on her way up. I immediately removed the plates from the warmer and took them to the table. I lit the candles and poured two glasses of wine.

The front door opened just as I stepped from the dining room. I walked toward Giselle with a glass of wine.

"What's the occasion?" she asked in a tired voice as she set her bags down.

"Welcome home," I responded and handed her the glass of wine.

She shook her head. “I probably shouldn’t accept this.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve had more drinks than I needed to have tonight.”

I took the drink back from her and then took her other hand.

“Where am I going? I want to shower and go to sleep.”

“I prepared dinner. Maybe I can feed you, and then you can go to sleep.”

There was something in her eyes when she looked at me, and I couldn’t decipher its meaning, but whatever it was, it spoke to my soul and made me want to put that look in her eyes more often.

I led her into the dining room, where I pulled out a chair for her to sit in. I took the chair opposite hers, and she looked around hesitantly. “It’s beautiful.”

“As are you.”

She cast her gaze at her plate and remarked, “It’s also romantic. Casimir, I—”

“Don’t read too much into it, Giselle. It’s just a nice, relaxing, and quiet dinner at home. Nothing less and nothing more.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

“Well, it all looks so delicious,” she remarked sleepily through a yawn.

“It is. I just want to make sure that you get something into your body before you fall asleep.”

“Thank you,” she whispered as she opened her mouth to take the first bite of the chicken.

“I was starting to worry about you.”

“Why?”

“It was getting late.”

“Mm. This is so moist and delicious,” Giselle complimented after she had finished the bite.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I went out with my friends to unwind. It’s been a challenging week.”

“Because of me?” I asked.

“Because of lots of things,” she replied and stared into my eyes. “My friends tell me that I’m wrong.”

“About?”

“You. They want me to leave and come stay with them.”

“What do you want?”

“To stay with you.”

“Then do that.”

“It’s too complicated. They reminded me of the same things I’m afraid of—losing my license and being a rebound.”

“You’re nobody’s rebound, baby.”

“I don’t know, Cas.”

“I don’t want to create problems for you, Giselle.”

She sighed and toyed with her food for a moment before she replied, “You’re not. I just need to get my head together.”

“Regarding you and me?”

“Casimir, there can be no you and me.”

“Eat your meal,” I ordered.

She frowned but did as I suggested. When she finished, I gathered our plates and took them into the kitchen, and Giselle followed me.

“Where did you learn to cook?” Giselle asked through a yawn as I rinsed the dishes and put them into the dishwasher. She sat on the counter beside the kitchen sink and swung her legs as she watched me.

“My mother. She was a military wife, and as the wife of a high-ranking officer, she often held dinner parties for my dad.”

“And you would hang out in the kitchen with her?” Giselle asked as I grabbed a dish towel and wiped down the countertops.

“Yeah. Asking different questions, making suggestions and things like that. She’d let me try whatever I suggested, even if she knew it wasn’t a good idea. She always told me that experience was the best teacher. That was how I learned what spices mixed well and which ones didn’t.”

“That was very sweet and patient of her. I don’t know that I would have had that same patience to let you mess up dish after dish or have to throw all that food away.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

I chuckled. “No, I learned quickly, especially considering my dad wasn’t that patient. I got that shit in order real quick.”

“I like that for you,” she replied.

“What about you? Who taught you to cook?”

“Both my parents and a little bit of me being creative when I was home alone.”

“Did you ever mess up anything so badly that you got in trouble for it?”

“No. Like your mother, my parents were very patient and forgiving. They supported whatever my sister, Genevieve, and I wanted to do.”

I finished cleaning the kitchen, and we walked back into the living room, where she curled up on the couch with a pack of cookies she snagged on the way out of the kitchen.

Giselle grabbed the remote and turned on some music while I poured myself a glass of Malbec. I sat down beside her and stared at her for several long seconds as she finished a cookie.

“What?”

“I’m not trying to pressure you, and I don’t mean to stress you out, Giselle.”

“Then don’t,” she replied and dropped her gaze back to her cookies.

“I want to address the elephant in the room.”

She hesitantly peered back up at me.

“No elephant. Just you and me.”

I chuckled. “I know when I first offered you this space, it was on the condition that you could have it for yourself. And you still can if you’d like.”

“What I would like is for your friend to get on his job before I have to hire someone else.”

“Is that what you really want?” I asked her.

She rolled her eyes and rested her elbow on the back of the couch. Setting her cookies in her lap, she rested her head on her palm.

“I don’t know what I want, Casimir. You confuse me.”

“Why is that?”

“You’re this overwhelming presence in my life right now, and where I could normally walk away from something or someone who I’ve made my mind up about, I can’t where you’re concerned.”

“And is that a bad thing?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“You’re fresh out of a marriage. You were my client, and I feel that I had a negative impact on your marriage, and I could lose my license.”

I leaned forward and removed the cookie pack from her lap.

“I wasn’t finished with those.”

“Yeah, you were,” I replied and stood.

I reached for her hand, and she gave it to me. When I pulled her up to stand in front of me, I wrapped an arm around her waist.

“What are you doing?”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

“Trying to make you forget about everything that you could lose.”

“Why?”

“Because I’d rather you focus on losing yourself in this.”

I lowered my head and brushed my lips softly against hers as Raveena Aurora’s “Honey” poured soothingly from the speakers.

Giselle lifted her arms and wrapped them loosely around my shoulders. We swayed softly to the music while we lost ourselves in a passionate kiss. Her tongue was soft and sweet as I took my time and sucked it. When I finally let it go, our lips remained pressed together, and a subtle sigh was my sign that she was satisfied.

“Although I feel safe in your arms, you scare me,” she whispered just loud enough to be heard above the music.

“Don’t be,” I replied.

“I’m afraid that I will drown in you.”

“I’ll be your lifeboat.”

“You’re so involved with someone else right now.”

“No. That was business, business that I tried to make something more. It didn’t work. But you and me, this . . . it could definitely work. Stop overthinking things.”

“I can’t, Casimir. What if I fall?”

“My arms are wide open, baby, and strong enough to cushion your impact.”

She closed her eyes and bowed her head. I placed my hand at the back of her head and pressed it deeper against my chest, and my other arm remained wrapped around her.

I would do anything to protect her.

But she pulled away.

“I need some time, Casimir.”

I watched helplessly as she walked away from me, leaving my heart open and yearning for her.

Giselle

One Week Later

I had successfully managed to avoid Casimir for a week. Or maybe I hadn’t avoided him as much as he had given me what I asked for. Time. Space.

When I returned home from work this evening, Casimir wasn’t there. I missed his presence, the sound of him, and his scent.

I had been in the guest bedroom that I used as an office when I heard him fumbling around in the other bedroom opposite the guest room. The one I occupied, the master suite, was on a side all to itself.

I put my laptop down and headed toward him. I watched him unpack in silence for several seconds before he turned around and spotted me.

“I just grabbed the last of my things from the house,” he explained.

“Mkay,” I murmured.

“I bought dinner. It’s in the kitchen.”

I went to the kitchen and fixed our plates. Casimir had ordered some Indian cuisine. After we finished, we settled on the couch and talked about our day. Things were fine until he changed the conversation to a personal topic.

“Why do you keep asking me that?” I asked when he had asked for the hundredth time what hurt me.

“Because you know everything about me. Every little secret, desire, and dream, I’ve already revealed to you. All I want to know is who hurt you so badly, and how can I fix it?”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

“You can’t,” I replied softly as I picked at the little nubs on the soft cotton blanket.

Casimir reached underneath the blanket and grabbed my foot. My eyes closed at the touch of his firm grip and the pressure he exerted on the sole of my foot with his thumb.

“Talk to me, Giselle.”

I sighed. “My late husband, Elijah.”

When I opened my eyes again, Casimir’s gaze was on me expectantly.

“Because he died?”

“He didn’t die. He took his own life.”

Briefly, but only for a short second, Casimir’s thumb stopped, and then he went back to work again. I told him the story, every little detail until I finished.

“He didn’t love me enough to stay,” I whispered. I hadn’t realized that a tear had fallen until he reached his finger out and swiped it away.

“Or he didn’t love himself enough to let your love be enough,” Casimir whispered.

I smiled briefly at him.

“What I mean by that is, more often than not, we take the actions of our loved ones

personally. But it isn't always about us. I think we believe that it is because we live in such a self-centered, superficial world. Sometimes, people drown so deeply in their depression that they can't focus on anything else beyond the blackness. It swallows them whole, and all the while they're drowning, they don't see the hands reaching out to help them. It's a spiritual battle. It was never a you-battle."

I smirked. "How did you become so wise, sir?"

"I had a friend who suffered from depression back in high school. He attempted it, but his family found him in time."

"Wow. Are you still in touch with him today?"

"JR."

My eyes bucked in my head. "That confident, bold, charming man suffered from depression and tried to kill himself?"

"He did. I missed all the signs."

"We often do," I whispered. "I felt like I failed Elijah. I knew he suffered from depression, but I never would have expected him to do that. I'm a trained and licensed psychologist, and I failed my husband."

The tears started back up again, and Casimir reached over and removed the blanket from my legs. He pulled me onto his lap, held me, and rocked with me. He whispered "shh" the entire time that he rubbed my back.

When I finished crying, I looked up at him and asked, "What did I do to deserve so much pain, though, Cas?"

He wiped my face and stared into my eyes. Before he could answer the question, I pressed my lips against his, sampling what I didn't need to sample, taking what wasn't mine to take, and indulging in the sinful pleasure known as Casimir.

I moaned as I twisted in his lap until I straddled him. My hands went to his face, and I held him in place as though he might pull back from the kiss. My hips had a mind all their own as they worked in time to a beat that only existed in my head.

My need for him grew stronger with every pass of my hips and provoked Casimir to place his hands there. He gripped me tightly as if to secure me to him and thrust upward. I could feel his erection through my cotton night shorts, and I wanted no distance between us.

Every thought about my license and the repercussions of what would happen in the morning passed away. I only cared about the moment, the here and the now. This precious, stolen moment was the only thing that mattered.

Just because Casimir had divorced Beth and moved out didn't mean that she was no longer in his heart. Tonight, that was a risk that I was willing to take as his large, firm hands moved from my hips, slid underneath my top, and stretched across my back.

Heat stole up my body, and I arched my back and pressed my breasts against him. His hands circled to the front, and large, gentle fingers rubbed back and forth in a slow rhythm across my nipples, bringing them to life.

His erection prodded me, begging for entrance. My hands reached down and tugged at the waistband of my night shorts until I pulled them over my ass. I lifted slightly, and Casimir moved in to take one tightly budded nipple into his mouth.

The warm heat of his tongue and lips almost caused an instant explosion in my body. I was surprised that I didn't leak out on him immediately. His hands helped me get

out of my shorts and panties. I climbed off him, and my chest heaved as I struggled to breathe through the intensity of the moment.

Casimir stood and removed his basketball shorts before he leaned around me and grabbed his phone from the table.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

“What are you doing?” I murmured as I pushed him back down.

He typed out something on his phone with one hand while he wrapped the other arm around my waist. I kissed the side of his neck while my hand gripped his length, and I slid my hand up and down him. I smiled through my kisses as he grew in my hand.

“Here,” Casimir stated and tugged me away from his neck.

“Whaaat?” I moaned.

“Look at this,” he replied and thrust his phone at me.

“What’s this?”

“My health screening. Every executive member of the company, insured at a certain level with life insurance, has to undergo annual screenings, which include drug, alcohol, and sexual health screenings. I just had mine three weeks ago. I haven’t been with anyone since. It’s actually been months since I had sex.”

My heart stilled in my chest. For a moment, I hadn’t even considered a condom. All I wanted was Casimir buried inside of me. Did he have that much power over me? Or was I that desperate? Possibly both. I was mortified that I hadn’t considered protecting myself against this man, who had only recently moved out from the home he shared with his ex-wife.

“I . . . I don’t have any recent screenings,” I revealed.

Casimir grabbed the sides of my face and covered my mouth with his before I could offer any further debates. He walked me backward, and I wondered where we were going as we moved beyond the coffee table.

Briefly, he cut off the kiss and stared into my eyes. “I don’t need your stats. I already know that you’re a good woman, Giselle.”

“My husband was the last man I was with,” I shared.

He kissed me again, lifted me, and lay me on the floor in front of the fireplace.

I stared up at him as he kneeled beside me. Casimir’s gaze took in my entire body in one full sweep before he slowly worked his eyes down again and basked in every part of me. My mouth parted before I bit my bottom lip, hoping, praying that he was happy with what he saw, with what he was getting.

He reached out a hand and smoothed it over my belly, pinched my thighs, and caressed my shins. His hands worked back up again, and he smoothed his hands over my shoulders before he positioned himself over me. With one hand planted on either side of my head, he stared down at me. He was in a plank position over me as he stared, and I suspected he was giving me time to change my mind.

“I want this, Cas. I want you.”

Those were the words he obviously had waited for. His head dipped as he slowly lowered his body over mine. His tongue extended to lick along the seam of my lips. I opened my mouth and allowed his tongue to sweetly and gently make love to mine.

We spoke a love language created by the two of us, one previously unknown to man. My hands slid up his arms and rested on his shoulders as I tugged to bring him closer to me. The pressure from the weight of his body made me feel not only covered but

secured.

“I don’t want to crush you, baby,” he whispered in the crook of my neck as he licked me there and set my body on fire.

I lifted my back from the floor and moaned, “Casimir.”

His hands squeezed my hips before he parted my legs and made room for himself between them.

“Are you ready to receive me?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“When I enter you, it will create an inseparable bond between us. A soul tie, if you will.” I nodded. “I don’t take these things lightly, Giselle. That means that I belong to you, and you belong to me.”

I nodded once more and wondered if I would regret it in the morning. But I wanted what I wanted and took what I needed as I reached between us and grabbed his erection. I dragged it between my folds. His brow furrowed as though he were in pain.

“You’re so wet and so hot.”

“For you,” I whispered.

This time, he was the one who nodded. He removed his arousal from my hand and slid it between my folds. When he sunk inside of me, I felt something explode in my chest.

“Cas,” I cried out as I rose to meet him.

He felt so perfect, so necessary, and so right. He shifted, and I lifted. Our mouths came together to confirm the conversation that our bodies were engaged in. Large, warm hands touched my body in places that I hadn’t been touched in a long time. His mouth pulled back from mine to kiss me in places I only dreamt about.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

When he pulled out of me, I thought that I would die. But he replaced his manhood with his mouth. With my legs hooked over his shoulders, he consumed me as if I were a five-star meal. I gyrated and shook as my body lifted from the floor, leaving only my shoulders and head resting there.

Casimir placed one hand under my butt and squeezed and massaged it, and with his other hand, he pushed me back to the floor. His hands spread my legs wide, and his fingers parted my pussy. He licked, slurped, fingered, and sucked me. And all the while, his intense gaze was on me.

Knowing that he brought that pleasure to me and that I could not hide how he made me feel was powerful. I could no longer hold back if I wanted to, and I didn't want to. I released in his mouth, with his tongue spread wide and flat on and inside of me. He nodded his encouragement as he slid a finger inside of me along with his tongue.

Tears sprung from my eyes, and my chest ached with how tightly I was wound. When he pulled back, he spoke no words. Casimir slid back inside of me again and worked my body over. I could feel him growing inside of me with every moan, whimper, plea, and cry that I released.

“You're so beautiful, Giselle. And this moment . . . the dreams that I had about us . . . they pale in comparison to the reality of being inside of you. Thank you,” he whispered before he leaned down to kiss me once more.

And if I thought it was impossible to cum again, he proved me wrong. He brought me to another orgasm only moments before he released within me. And when we were finished, he rolled onto the floor beside me, pulled me into his arms, and kissed me

sweetly on my temple.

“Thank you, beautiful.”

I closed my eyes and drifted off into a peaceful sleep.

Casimir

“Are you certain you want to do this, Son?”

“I’ve never been more certain of anything in my life.”

“You’re making a grave mistake. This will impact our bottom line. The stocks are going to tank, Casimir.”

“I doubt that. Glenco is strong and able to withstand anything. If you’re placing Will Jennings in my place, that will send a strong message to the consumers and stakeholders that the company is still in good standing. Besides, he was the one being groomed before I came into the fold anyway,” I informed Preston Willcott, the board chair of Glenco.

“Have you told Oliver?” Preston asked, referring to Oliver Huffington, who was Bethany’s grandfather.

“No. He’s traveling in Europe right now.”

“What about Scott?”

Scott Huffington was Bethany’s uncle, the CFO, and he couldn’t be bothered with that type of responsibility. My next person to report to was the board chair, which was what I was doing.

“I’ve called Scott numerous times. He’s on a drunken binge in Polynesia with a woman named Lupe, who answered his phone and then tried to get a laughing, hiccupping Scott on the phone.”

Preston rolled his eyes and sighed dramatically. “I just don’t know that Will is ready.”

“He’s ready. He’s more prepared than I was when I was thrust into the role.”

“I don’t know. You had a learning curve, but you are a born leader, Casimir. Will is not. He’s someone we’ve spent years grooming.”

I stood from the conference table. “Well, I think it’s time to see if all that hard work was of good use.”

“When is your last day?” the older man asked as he opened the envelope.

“Today,” I replied with a smile as I shoved my hand into my pockets and strolled out of the conference room.

I could hear him choking on outrage as I made my way down the hall and to the elevators. I waited until I was out of the building before I made the phone call.

“Hello?”

“You can begin leaking the news now.”

“Done.”

I climbed into my car and headed across town to River Oaks. I woke up this morning with the sun shining in my heart. I had been counting down to this day for the last

three and a half months. When I left, Giselle was still asleep.

After making love to her last night, she had fallen asleep. I lay on the floor holding her for almost an hour, staring at her before I woke her. We showered together and then went to bed in my room. When I woke up this morning and saw her lying in my arms, I felt so damn good. Knowing that it hadn't been just a dream warmed my heart.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

She'd turned over, whimpered, and drifted back to sleep when I got out of bed. I was content to leave her there, and when I'd dressed, she was still asleep. I wasn't sure if she planned to go into the office or not. I hadn't called her, and she had not called me. But I had texted her mid-morning and asked if she could get away early and meet me at home.

She agreed and stated that she didn't have many clients. I'd told her to dress in something comfortable. My day had been hectic as I put all the final steps of my plan into place. I didn't have time to change while I was at the office, so I'd run into the penthouse and changed and made it to the parking lot just as Giselle was pulling in.

"Where are we going?" she asked as I took over driving her car.

"Can you sit back and relax?" I asked.

"I'm nervous."

"Why?"

"I don't know, I just am."

I glanced at her a few times and then pulled over in an empty parking lot. I turned to face her. "Look, I know what's going through your head."

"No, you don't."

"Yes, I do. You're worried about where I'm taking you, and you're wondering if

someone might spot us out and about together.”

She bit her bottom lip and bobbed her head.

“No one knows anything about our past professional relationship, other than Imani and Beth. I somehow don’t think Imani would turn you in, and I can promise you that where we’re going, we won’t see Beth or anyone she knows.”

“Are you sure?”

“I promise,” I replied against her lips. “All I want to do is shelter, protect, and love you.”

A smile teased her lips as we pecked several times before I pulled back. I put the car in drive and pulled away again.

“What were you smiling about, Dr. C?”

“Your comment about loving me. You can’t possibly feel that already. You don’t know me that well.”

“I have a feeling it’s not hard to do,” I replied and glanced at her.

She wore an odd expression on her face, and I knew that she was uncomfortable with me professing anything that sounded like love to her. She would just need to be comfortable because I felt like it might be easy to fall for her.

We pulled up to our destination forty minutes later, and Giselle’s eyes grew wide in her face.

“What is that?” she asked as she climbed out of the car and pointed.

“What does it look like?” I asked as I took her hand and led her to the large field.

“It looks like a hot air balloon.”

“Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding! The lady has guessed the correct answer. Her prize will be a new washer and dryer!” I announced into my cupped fist as though I had a microphone.

“Shut up.” She laughed as she punched me in the chest.

“Ouch! You hit hard.”

“Oh, I don’t,” she replied and laughed. “But are we seriously about to ride that?”

“Yes. I wanted an aerial view of Cherokee Springs with you by my side.”

“Oh my gosh. This is so exciting and yet so scary, Cas.”

“I’m just thankful to share this moment with you,” I confided as we approached our balloon operator.

“Rod?”

“Yes. And you must be Casimir, and this is Elle?”

“The one and only,” I replied and smiled at Giselle, who bucked her eyes at me.

I leaned in and kissed her neck. “I will always protect you,” I whispered.

I didn’t see the need for our operator to know her name. We filled out a few forms regarding safety and releases before Rod explained to us what we could expect and went over the rules with us.

A few minutes later, we had not only climbed inside the balloon, but Rod had already begun heating the air in the balloon’s envelope using the burner.

“Are you scared?” I asked Giselle as I wrapped my arms around her from behind. She stood at the edge of one side of the balloon and her hands held onto the edge of the basket.

“A little, but excited too.”

“I’ll protect you, baby,” I whispered.

She looked over her shoulder at me and replied with a smile, “So, you keep saying.”

“And I’ll keep proving it too.”

“Is that what Elle is all about?”

“Mm-hmm,” I murmured and bit the shell of her ear.

The balloon slowly floated up into the air, and Giselle released a happy peal of laughter as we continued to rise.

“This was never something I dreamt of doing, Cas,” she shared when we had reached eleven hundred feet.

Everything below us was still clear, but plots of land were clearly delineated and outlined in squares in a grid-like system like they were when flying in an airplane, but it was much clearer.

“Where are we going?” Giselle asked Rod.

“I don’t know.”

“Uhm . . . what do you mean you don’t know?”

“You see those guys down there?” he asked as he pointed at some pickup trucks down below.

“Yeah.”

“That’s our ground crew. We’re at the mercy of the wind up here. Because there’s no engine, we ride the wind currents at various altitudes. Now, I can control our altitude.”

“How?” she asked.

“Heating the air with the propane in this burner. It makes the air in the balloon less dense and causes it to rise. When we’re ready to descend, I’ll reduce the flame or vent the air out of the top, and we’ll begin to descend. Relax,” Rod said with a friendly smile.

“Oh . . . okay.” She agreed with a nervous laugh.

But the longer we flew, and the higher we rose, the more Giselle calmed down.

“This is so unbelievable, Cas,” she shared with laughter. Her eyes were bright and sparkled with happiness. She looked like a little kid, and I wondered, not for the first time, how often her late husband had done things to surprise her and bring this look of awe to her face.

“It’s so peaceful up here,” she remarked.

“It truly is. Rising above all the limitations that people put on us,” I stated quietly.

She turned to look at me and placed her hands on either side of my face. Pressing her lips against mine, she stated, “Thank you.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

“Anything for you, beautiful.”

When we descended, it was in the rear empty mall parking lot. Her eyes widened again as she looked at me and then at the mall.

“Chill. We’re at South Heights,” I whispered and pointed to the mall sign. “Do you think that Bethany would ever show her face on this side of town?” I asked.

South Heights was in Old Barrington Heights, the poorest community in Cherokee Springs. In short, it was the hood and not a place that Bethany or anyone affiliated with her might be.

When we climbed out and thanked Rod, I grabbed her hand and headed to one of the trucks that had arrived. One of Rod’s crewmen drove us back to Giselle’s car where I once again drove us home.

We rode with chill Lo-fi music playing in the background. The sun had already begun to set, and the streetlights were coming on. I reached across the console and reached for her hand. She turned her head my way and smiled at me. I couldn’t see her eyes through her sunglasses, but I imagined they held the same smile.

She closed her fingers around mine and lifted them to her lips. I relished the warm touch of her lips against my knuckles.

“Baby, you’re going to have to learn to relax and to trust me.”

“I do trust you.”

“Not going out in public, you don’t. I don’t want to hide you away. I want to take you places and enjoy our time together, and I don’t want that to be marred by you worrying about Beth jumping out of a tree.”

“Hey, don’t get me wrong, but it’s not like I’m scared of your ex-wife. I am worried about what will happen if she decides to report us.”

“Let me handle that.”

Giselle nodded. “One more thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Everything that I heard you say, Cas, was about what you wanted, not about what I wanted. With me, you’ll never have to fight for your rights or wants. I’m not her.”

“I know that, sweetheart. I know.”

We pulled up to the front of our building and handed the keys to the valet attendant to park her car. They would return them in an envelope to our floor when the car was finished.

“I’m starving,” she stated as we walked into the penthouse.

“Don’t worry. I thought maybe we could head downstairs to the club area and grab something to eat.”

Giselle had already toed off her shoes.

“I think I can handle that.”

I wiggled my fingers, she slid her shoes back on, and we headed downstairs hand-in-hand. I ordered grilled chicken sandwiches for both of us, kettle chips for me, a Caesar salad for her, and two Mike's Hard Lemonades for both of us.

We chilled in the outdoor area, ate our dinner, and watched as the stars came out to shine in the night sky.

"This is living," Giselle commented as she lay back in her lounge chair after we'd finished eating.

I turned my head sideways, reached for her hand, and clasped our hands together. "It is, and I want to do it with you."

Her smile faltered briefly, and she looked up at the stars again. Today had been a perfect day, but I also knew all hell had broken loose. I just wanted to keep it at bay for as long as possible. Tomorrow, I would answer the hundreds of phone calls, text messages, and emails that I had received since I left Glenco earlier in the day. Tomorrow, I would tell Giselle what I had done. But tonight, I just wanted to enjoy time with this beautiful lady.

Giselle

When I woke up, Casimir was already gone. The night before was beautiful, and I enjoyed our time together. I knew that I was falling for him, and the logical part of me, with my medical background, knew that it was foolish and unsafe. But the romantic in me kept nudging me over the edge with every memory, every touch, and every taste of him.

After dinner, we returned to the penthouse, and we showered together. Casimir had washed my body, constantly kissing me, but he didn't make love to me. He told me that he was tempted, but he wanted so much more from me. After our shower, I had

fallen hard asleep, exhausted by the day's events.

I only had two clients on the calendar for today, and both of those were virtual meetings. They struggled with agoraphobia and seldom stepped outside. I had just concluded the second one on Zoom when I heard the doorbell ring.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

A glance at the clock showed that it was 5:38. I had no idea who would ring the bell because Casimir was in the shower. He had come home early, saying that he needed to discuss some things with me, but I was just about to start my final session for the day. So, we agreed to discuss it over dinner when I finished with my client. Jude wouldn't drop by without calling first. Although my sister and friends had pressured me to stay with them, I declined because I was fine where I was.

Visitors had to be either on an approved list and be scanned up or called up from the front desk, and neither of those things had happened, to my knowledge. The only thing I could conclude was that it was a staff person in the building or one of the other residents.

"Cas," I called out as I headed into the living room. "Are you out of the shower yet?"

My heart almost dropped when I stepped into the living room and saw Casimir standing in the foyer with the front door wide open. The person standing just inside of the doorway was Bethany. I froze and wanted to disappear. My worst nightmare was coming true.

"Well, isn't this just cozy?"

"Beth—"

"No, it's perfectly fine, Casimir. No need to explain anything."

"You act as if I have to explain anything to you. We're divorced. Or did you forget?"

“Of course not. And now I see why. I understand why you were in such a rush to not only end the marriage but move out of the house too.”

“I didn’t move out nearly as quickly as I should have.”

“Yeah, well, you did enjoy our final night together.”

“What’s she talking about, Cas?”

Bethany smirked. “Oh, I guess he didn’t share details of our last night together.”

“Beth, stop.” Casimir hissed.

“What is she talking about, Cas?”

“Nothing,” he growled.

“Oh, after all the work I put in, it was nothing? It seemed like something when you were losing control and begging for more when I had your cock in my mouth, sucking you dry the night before you moved out. The way you moaned and begged for more was just like old times. That’s when I knew that she wasn’t taking care of you.”

I felt sick to my stomach as I looked at Casimir. I could see the guilt on his face.

“I guess you must have been trying to get your little love nest in order for you and the good doctor.”

Although I wore a short-sleeved, wine-colored blouse for purposes of the Zoom call, on my bottom I wore a pair of lounge pants.

“Don’t do that, Beth.” Casimir snarled.

“Don’t do what? Point out the fact that the same doctor who was supposed to save our marriage is the same one who destroyed it? I guess that was part of her manipulative plan. Get you all to herself so that she can get her hands on your money, and now you’ve brought this fancy place to hide your whore in.”

“Watch your fucking mouth, Beth!”

“Why? Why should I, Cas? I wouldn’t be surprised if you’ve had this place all along and you’ve been hiding her away up here. Is that why she always looked down her nose at me? Did she know all along your dirty little secret? Have the two of you been having your little penthouse affair behind my back?”

“Leave!” he barked.

“You’re a fool, Casimir! But I didn’t know that you were an idiot. Is she also the reason that you resigned from your position at Glenco yesterday?”

They both heard my gasp of shock behind them because he turned to face me, and her furious eyes pinned me in place.

“Cas, is what she saying true?”

Beth smirked and placed her hands on her hips. “Yes, sweetheart. Let’s see how much longer he can keep this place upnow. You might as well find yourself a new sugar daddy because this one’s broke.”

“Bethany—”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

“Do not speak to her, Giselle. Ignore her.” Casimir seethed through his teeth.

I took several steps forward until I stood by his side.

“I am not a part of Casimir’s life to take advantage of him or to use him for my benefit. I’m not here to make him into anything other than the man he is, and I see him for who he is and accept him for who he is. So, whatever you’re thinking, please get it out of your head. I was not involved with your husband while the two of you were married. And I do not need him or any man to take financial care of me when I’m capable of doing so myself. In fact,—”

“Giselle!”

I jumped at the bite in his voice and the way he gripped my upper arm and pulled me protectively behind him.

“I’m glad that you’re feeling that way now, Dr. Champagne. Because I can promise you that I will be bringing this before the state board, and we’ll see what they have to say about the matter.”

My heart dropped, and I closed my eyes. This was the main reason I hadn’t wanted to get involved with Casimir besides him being married.

Casimir moved so fast that it caught both Bethany and me off guard.

“I swear to God, if she so much as gets a letter about a hearing for unprofessional conduct, you will regret it,” he growled as he backed her up against the wall.

I had never seen Bethany have anything other than an attitude of superiority or outrage. Fear etched on the planes of her face or shining from her eyes wasn't a look I ever thought I'd see. Yet, her skin had blanched pale, and her eyes were wide.

"Casimir," I called gently.

Despite my heart breaking, I was more concerned about the impact his actions would have on his future if he threatened her in any way. I wasn't worried that he would cause harm to her. Although I hadn't known either of them long, I knew Casimir well enough to know in my heart that he would never hit a woman.

"You'd do well to remember what the fuck I told you, Beth. If I catch you around here again, I promise that you'll wish that you had never lain eyes on me in life!"

Bethany jumped and backed up out of the door after I tugged on Casimir's arm one final time and forced him to back up.

He slammed the door so hard that the vase on the foyer table shook. He caught it just before it smashed to the ground. I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to ward off the inner turbulence that I didn't realize I was feeling until Bethany left.

"Giselle," Casimir called to me through the emotional fog that I staggered through.

I didn't respond, still reeling by the fact that Bethany not only knew about us and threatened my license, but the night before he came to me, he had been with her.

"Giselle," Casimir stated again as he grabbed my shoulders and slightly shook me.

"What?" I knew my voice was cold and riddled with anger, but I did not care. I was angry with myself for making such a stupid decision to become involved with him.

“Are you okay?”

“No. I’m not.”

He crushed me to him and wrapped me up in his arms. “I’m so sorry, baby. So sorry,” he whispered. He repeated it until it turned into Spanish. “Lo siento.”

I recalled that his father was Dominican, and he grew up in a household that spoke both English and Spanish.

I pulled back from his grasp and stared up at him. “It won’t be okay, Cas. I could lose my license behind this.”

“And I will take care of you.”

“I don’t want to depend on a man to take care of me.”

He gripped my chin and tilted it back. “Do you recall when I told you the moment that we had sex, it created an inseparable bond, a soul tie, and that you now belonged to me, and I belonged to you?”

Tears pricked my eyes. “What’s that got to do with anything?” I asked and angrily swiped tears from my eyes.

“That shit meant everything to me, Giselle. I don’t talk for the sake of hearing my voice. When I speak, I mean what the fuck I say. You’re mine. And I take care of what belongs to me. Even if that means I gotta go to war. If that bitch wants a war, she’s got one.”

“She’s threatened my license, though, Casimir.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

“That’s light work. Let me handle that.”

“Her family has power, Cas. Money.”

“I’ve got power and money.”

I scoffed. “Not their kind, and according to her, you’ve quit your job.”

“Baby, they have a militia, but I’ve got a fucking army behind me.”

“Your street friends don’t have anything on the Huffingtons and Bradwells, I’m sure.”

A smirk tilted his lips and transformed the man before me. I had seen various sides of Casimir before, but I swear to God, I didn’t know the man who stood before me now.

“Never underestimate your man. General Leo Anthony Perez didn’t become a four-star general by sitting on his ass. My father is a brilliant man who always employed both critical thinking and strategic vision in everything that he did. I learned from the best. They’re not ready for me. I will win this war. The only thing I need is for my woman to believe in me. I can do anything with your faith and belief in me. You understand?”

“I understand what you’re saying, but I need you to understand how hard this is for me, Cas. When I lost Elijah, I vowed to myself that I would never put myself in a position where I would hurt this way again. I never wanted to love someone so much again that I lost myself if I lost them.”

“We all take that risk, baby. Any time we love, we take the risk. Whether it’s our parents, siblings, friends, or a lover, there will always be that risk because we’re all going to die one day. But this ain’t that.”

“I have no idea what you’re planning, but it’s scaring me. And what scares me even more is the loss of my independence. I worked hard as hell to get my doctoral degree, to become licensed, to start my practice, and to build my clientele. To have that taken away from me because I love a man who once belonged to someone else . . . I cannot fathom that, Cas.”

A strange look crossed his face, and it wasn’t until he squinted his eyes and held my face in his hands that I realized my mistake. I vowed that I wouldn’t tell him how I truly felt. I believed that if I kept it to myself and did not acknowledge it verbally, it wouldn’t have the power to hurt me. But the love I felt for this man caught me by surprise and stole my breath away at the most inconvenient of moments.

“Did you just say that you love me?”

Casimir lifted my face again and forced me to look into his eyes.

“Please don’t act like that makes this the end of the world. Do you know how long I’ve wanted to hear a woman say that and mean that shit? Do you know what it feels like to have women fawn over you and treat you like a commodity but never know if their love is really real? With you, I know that it is true, Giselle.”

I swiped at the tears that fell from my eyes. “That’s what makes it so hard, Cas. The way I feel about you makes it hard for me to breathe sometimes. I don’t know what to do with that.”

“Loving is not always easy, Giselle. It’s a battle sometimes, but one worth fighting for. I will fight for your love until time ends and begins again because you’re worth

that to me. Do you want to know the day that I fell in love with you?"

"You don't love me."

"Can't you see it in how I care for and protect you? The way that I hold you through the night, massage your feet when you're tired, and run your baths are all small tokens of my love."

"It's convenient for you to say it now, isn't it?"

"I didn't want to risk running you away. But I've loved you for a long time. I knew that I loved you the day that I walked out of your office, and you forced me to turn around and look in your eyes. You gave me a warning about how to handle myself in volatile times, and then you called me 'king.'"

"I already wanted to protect you from Beth's evil ways, but what you did . . . no one had ever done anything like that for me before. You showed how much you cared with those simple words. And I fell in love with you at that moment. That was the day that I told Beth I wanted a divorce. We hadn't even made it out of your parking lot."

"Yet, you lied to me."

"About what?"

"You said you hadn't been with anyone, but you were with her the night before you returned to me." I spun away from him and locked myself in the room.

Casimir

Some may say that I took advantage of the moment. I wasn't an opportunist, but I

was strategic. Giselle was a guarded woman when it came to her feelings, especially where I was concerned. Her guard was down, and I wanted to strengthen her with my love.

It took three days before she would speak to me and let me explain what happened between Beth and me that night. She was in her room packing when it happened, and I had returned home early. When I finished, she cursed me out, slammed her fists against my chest, and then told me how I failed to protect her despite promising her that I always would. She broke down crying after that, and I inserted myself into the moment.

I kissed her tears away and worked my way down her neck. I lifted her in my arms and carried her back to my room. With her arms locked around my neck, she kissed me passionately, almost desperately, like she was afraid she might lose me. I lay her on the bed and slowly peeled away her yoga pants and thong.

I kissed her inner thighs and nestled my face between them. Giselle spread her legs wide and cradled my head with her hands. Sliding my thumb through her folds, I stared up at her and spoke.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

“I have loved people in my life, Giselle. I even loved Beth for a while. But I have never been in love until now.”

I kissed her clitoris, slid a finger inside of her, and made her whimper.

“Your beauty inside and out gives life to my heart.”

I sucked her clitoris, and she arched her hips up.

“You’re such a giving and honest person. You sacrifice your happiness for that of others.”

I sucked her folds and dragged my tongue through them before I pulled back. I slid two fingers inside of her and scissored them.

“When I asked you who was there for you, it wasn’t to make you feel bad about yourself but to take a look at the choices you make. I wanted you to see yourself the way that I do. I wanted you to recognize the beauty within yourself because I suspected that you didn’t.

I pulled my fingers back and opened her folds so that I could stick my tongue inside of her.

“Cas!” She screamed out as she gripped the sides of my head and plunged up powerfully. I sucked and licked for several seconds before I pulled back.

“I am him. I am that nigga. The one who will always be here for you, Elle.”

She cried out again as I plunged a third finger inside of her as I spoke those words. When she did, I removed my fingers and used my lips and tongue to make my woman lose her muthafuckin mind and speak two different languages. I spelled her name inside of her pussy with my tongue. Tears seeped from underneath her closed eyelids long after she had cum.

When I pulled back, I stood and removed my clothes before I joined her on the bed.

“Remove your blouse and play with your nipples for me, baby,” I instructed as I lifted her legs and wrapped them around me.

Trembling fingers obeyed my command until she lay before me with her blouse wide open and her breasts spilling from her pink lace bra.

Positioned on my knees between her legs, I slid inside of her. That hot pussy cloaked around me and cleaved to me. I felt like a key inserted into the lock as she wound up again. Every stroke, every plunge, and every thrust I gave my woman served to prove to her that she was all I needed. I hadn’t lied.

I had fucked many women, had sex with them, took care of them sexually and gently, but I had never loved a woman. Being with Giselle and taking care of her physically and mentally let me know that I hadn’t ever really loved Bethany. I cared about her as a person and as my wife. I loved her the same as I did Jude, my parents, and other people in my life.

As I slid in and out of Giselle, I envisioned her walking down the aisle to me and taking my last name. I thought about her belly swelling with my seed. In my mind’s eye, I could see her chasing my children around the house, and I could see her sitting on a swing beside me as we held hands.

I pumped inside of Giselle and slowly circled within her, and tears fell from my eyes.

The love I felt for her spilled over as she thumbed her nipples, squeezed them, and pinched them. She slid her hand down her belly and rubbed her clitoris as I continued to pump inside of her.

“I love you, Cas,” she whispered.

I squeezed her thighs and lay on top of her to seal us in every possible way. Her legs wrapped around me as I lifted her chin so that I could devour her lips and enjoy the taste of her. She held me close as she sucked on my tongue and licked my lips.

I made love to my woman and eased her fears. Despite the fact that anger grew within me at the memory of her standing there with fear on her face at Bethany’s threat, I kept my calm, and I cherished my woman’s body.

When we erupted, it wasn’t the way that we made love. None of the gentleness, tenderness, or quiet was there. It became rough and loud as we both fought it off, wanting to stay in the cocoon we were in a little longer. My teeth ground together, and she sobbed loudly. My fingers pinched her hips, and our mouths clashed together as I tried to quiet her sobs and prevent myself from gnashing my teeth further.

We moaned in each other’s mouths, and our bodies became slick with heat and sweat, and they slapped together as I drove deeper inside of her and as she gave up her orgasm. When she finished, I pulled back from the kiss and rammed inside of her so hard that she screamed, and I roared my pleasure out into the bedroom.

We were lying in bed hours later. I had ordered Chinese and had it delivered. We ate, drank wine, made love again, and showered. Now we were lying in bed beside each other, still wet from our shower.

I pulled my hands through her slightly damp hair as she traced a pattern on my chest.

“How did she find us?”

“Her attorney. We had to make a list of all our assets during the divorce.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about your resigning?”

“I was going to. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about when I came home before Beth showed up.”

“You could have told me before.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

I sighed. “I didn’t want to talk about it the day that I did it. When I woke up that morning, I knew that it was the day, and I felt powerful. I didn’t want you to try to talk me out of it or psychoanalyze me—”

“I don’t do that,” she argued and slapped me on the chest.

I pulled back and looked down into her face with a smile. “Yeah, you do.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Babe.”

“Do I?” she asked and cutely wrinkled her nose.

“Yes, you do.”

She pouted her bottom lip out and apologized. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I choose to engage or not engage. No worries. I just knew that a few mornings ago wasn’t that day. And before the shit hit the fan, I wanted one final day in our cocoon to just love on you and cherish you.”

“But you didn’t tell me that morning either.”

“I planned to. That’s why I got up earlier to take care of my morning routine so I could sit and talk with you before I left. But you were tired, babe, and you weren’t moving.”

“Yeah, I was worn out after the balloon ride.”

“Right. So, I figured I’d do it that evening. I just didn’t expect the unexpected.”

“Wait. There’s no way that you came to a major decision like that the other morning. How long had you been planning that?”

“Long before I met you. Well over a year ago, I set the date that would be my final date at the company.”

“You’ve always planned to leave her?”

“Not at first, no. But I never wanted that position.”

“Wow. You had this entire life thrust upon you that you didn’t want. Most men would have loved to be in your position.”

“I’m not a man who likes to be controlled or manipulated, baby.”

“Most men don’t.”

“But for a dollar amount, they can be convinced to look the other way.”

“Didn’t you?”

“No. I looked the other way for the sake of my father, the general.”

“I’m sure that he won’t be pleased when he gets a hold of you.”

“He already has. I stopped by my parents’ house on the way home that day. My mother knew that something was going to happen, but she didn’t know the details.

She wasn't surprised, but the general was upset. He supports me, though, no matter what."

"How are you going to take care of yourself? Do you have a savings account until you can find something else? Will they try to sabotage your efforts at getting another job?"

"No. None of that is a problem."

"I mean, I wouldn't mind taking care of you and being your sugar mama, but I might be out of a job soon too. This penthouse has been nice, but maybe we're about to be in the unemployment line."

Though she spoke those words jokingly, I could see the concern in her eyes.

"Can your man speak for a moment and put your mind at ease, woman?" I asked as I gripped the curve of her hip.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

“Sure.”

“Four years ago, I started a travel agency, Atlas Dreams.”

“Cas. Are you kidding me? My family and I use them all the time. How didn’t I know that was you?”

“Most people don’t, including my family. From there, I was able to purchase The Pinnacle and Edgewater. Not long ago, I added The Apex Hotel to my portfolio.”

“And no one knows any of this?”

“No.”

“How?”

“They’re all under an umbrella company, C.A.P. I used my initials to create it.”

“No offense, but I know that your family lived a comfortable lifestyle, but if I’m not mistaken, before you married Bethany, you were a hedge fund manager. I know they make money, but not that type of money. I’m still amazed at how fast you rose in both careers.”

Sighing, I admitted, “I’m not proud of it, but my father has opened many doors for me. Not that he had to do anything, but his name alone opened doors. That’s why I started my company. I wanted to do something of my own that had nothing to do with the privilege of him being my father or the privilege of being married into the

Huffington and Bradwell families.

“I started as a junior analyst at Smith, Jones & Prather Investment Bank after I graduated college. It’s where I had done my internship, and I remained there throughout my career as a hedge fund manager. The bank’s owner and my father had regular golf outings every week. That’s how I leapfrogged from junior analyst into the position of a hedge fund manager, though I was good as hell at what I did.”

“Did you resent that?”

“No. I won’t lie. I didn’t lean on it, but I did welcome the possibilities. When I married Bethany, her father and maternal grandfather instantly dubbed me for the role of COO because her grandfather and his entire executive staff were preparing to retire. His son did not want the position, and they wanted someone in the role who they could manipulate. I didn’t know that at the time.”

“I’m sure that insulted you when you learned it.”

“I already suspected it, but yeah, it stung a bit when I realized that they were calling all the shots. After year two of that, I shut that shit down and began to make my moves and prove my worth.”

“You earned your position.”

“I earned the right to maintain it. I was placed in it because of nepotism. There’s no other way around it. It was what it was, and it pissed a lot of folks off. Anyway, I knew that I wanted to do something that would be free of all of their influence. That’s how I started my business.”

“Where did you get that type of money?”

“My maternal grandparents left me with a nice nest egg that they had been stockpiling since they married. They started it for my mother, but she never touched it because my father took care of her, and they had no need for it. When my parents learned she was pregnant with me, they set it aside for me and continued to grow it. That nest egg, paired with my investments, paved the way for the travel agency. The hotels came from the proceeds of that, my continued investments, and some network relationships I built along the way.”

“Wow. I’m impressed.”

“I didn’t say all that to impress you but to assure you that I can take good care of you. I purchased this penthouse with the money I earned. The salary that I earned from Glenco sits in an account, accruing interest. I haven’t touched a single dime from the first paycheck. I did not need to. Most importantly, when people learn who I am, I don’t want them to associate that with the Huffingtons, and I don’t want the Huffingtons to think they bought shit for me.”

She leaned up on her elbow and hovered over me. “I’m so proud of you,” she whispered.

I pulled her face down and kissed her passionately.

“Thank you, baby. I just need you to keep loving me, and I’ll be okay.”

“I can do that as long as you’re honest and tell me everything from the rip,” she assured me.

Long after Giselle’s eyes closed, I lay awake late into the night, plotting my next step.

Giselle

“All right, Kelly. I think we made a lot of progress today. Good work,” I stated, closing my iPad and standing.

The young lady smiled at me and stood. She stretched and yawned before she replied, “Dr. Champagne, I feel better today than I’ve felt in a long time.”

I walked with her to my office door. “That’s because you finally confronted your truth. As I told you, it would be hard, but be proud of yourself because you did the work.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

I escorted her to the front desk so that she could make her next appointment.

“Imani, I’m about to take a lunch break before my next appointment. If you need anything, please call me.”

“Okay, Dr. Champagne,” Imani replied as she pulled up the calendar on her monitor to schedule Kelly’s next appointment.

I turned back to my office to grab my purse just as I heard a voice behind me.

“Dr. Champagne. Or should I say, future Mrs. Casimir Perez.”

I swiftly turned around with a glare in my eyes as I spotted Bethany walking through the door. With her sky blue cashmereChanel suit and matching purse and those Manolo Blahnik heels, she looked like the billions of dollars that she was worth.

“I hope you’re not here for the marriage counseling. If you are, I’d watch my back, or better yet, your husband,” Bethany stated to a confused Kelly.

I swiftly made my way to Bethany until we stood toe-to-toe. “Would you like a moment of my time, Ms. Huffington-Bradwell?” I hissed.

She sneered, and her eyes flashed with fire.

“Are you afraid?” she hissed back.

“Never that, sweetheart. You can fuck with me, but don’t you dare touch my business

or threaten it again,” I hissed.

A clearing throat behind me forced me to straighten the lapels of my jacket before I replied, “Come with me.”

I turned sharply on my heels, headed to my office, and breathed a sigh of relief at the sound of Bethany’s heels clicking on the marble floor behind me. I made a mental note to thank Imani later for sending a subtle reminder that I had a patient.

I didn’t bother to look in Kelly’s or Imani’s direction as I passed the reception desk on the way to my office. When Bethany stepped inside, I closed the door firmly behind her.

“Speak,” I demanded.

“While you were busily brainwashing my husband to leave his marriage and career—”

“Ex-husband,” I replied.

“Either way, I would suggest that you reconsider it. I was not playing when I told you that I would have your license suspended. I have had a formal complaint drawn up, and when I leave your office today, it will be sent to the state Board after I make one phone call to my attorney. It’s completely up to you what the outcome of your future looks like.”

I scoffed. “Are you threatening me, Bethany?”

“I don’t issue threats, only promises. You have the power.”

“And what am I supposed to do to keep you from doing that? I guess you want me to

stay away from Casimir.”

She clapped and smiled sweetly. “I knew that you didn’t earn that doctor’s degree by being stupid. You may have made some foolish choices, but you’re a smart woman.”

“Why do you feel threatened by me?”

“I don’t, but you destroyed my marriage.”

“Do you really believe that, Bethany? You do not even love that man.”

“You have no idea how I feel about him.”

“I watched you week after week sit here and ridicule him for his past, denigrate his ideas, and idealize yourself. Nothing about your actions or words spoke of love, Bethany. I’m not sure if you even love yourself.”

“How dare you!”

“Because it’s the truth, and I’m committed to telling that, if nothing else.”

“I don’t know what you did to my husband, if it was in the bedroom or if he was under your desk, but you have him making very foolish decisions. Quitting the company when he did and the news of our divorce being made public were not smart decisions on his part. That information is hitting the company in a very real way, as demonstrated by our falling stock prices this last week. It hit the staff, investors, and consumers in this country. If you care at all about him, you will move him to reconsider his position. It will impact his bottom line too. And when my father retaliates, it will be with a firm and swift hand.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

“The difference between you and me, Bethany, is that I have faith in that man. I do not presume that he made a consequential decision that impacts far more than just him without taking all the variables into account. The man was a hedge fund manager in his previous career. Do you honestly believe that he doesn’t know what he’s doing?”

“Either that or he doesn’t care. I care about our company and its stakeholders. I will fight for what I believe in, and that includes the man I vowed to spend the rest of my life with.”

“Rather than trying to fight for someone who you never wanted or appreciated, you should just step aside and allow a woman who knows how to love, uplift, and empower him to do just that. You don’t want him, Beth. And you don’t care about that company other than how it benefits you. You just don’t want to see Casimir happy with anyone else. Use your control somewhere that it’s wanted and needed, not to manipulate people.”

“I’ve said what I said. Are you going to leave Casimir alone or not?” Bethany demanded.

I took one step closer to her. “Do what you have to do, Bethany. In the meantime, see your way out of my office, and don’t step foot in these doors again.”

She smirked. “You’d better enjoy this office while you still can.”

“And I’d suggest you enjoy these little games you’re playing while you still can because your house of cards is about to come tumbling down, Bethany.”

“I’ll give you twenty-four hours to come to your senses, and then you can kiss your little practice goodbye.”

When she walked out of my office I walked to the couch and dropped down on it. With my head bowed and in my hands, I whispered a silent prayer for strength, courage, and wisdom.

“Hey, baby. What was so urgent that I needed to meet you?” Casimir asked, breezing through the door later that evening. He had a large bouquet of peonies in a gorgeous vase that he handed to me.

“What are these for?” I asked, temporarily ignoring his question.

“I was just thinking about you today, and I wanted to bring you flowers. Is that a problem?” Casimir asked and set his briefcase down on the kitchen island in front of him.

I stood on the other side, chopping vegetables for a salad.

“No,” I muttered.

Casimir frowned and walked around the island. He wrapped his arms around my waist and nuzzled my neck. “Baby, what’s going on?”

I froze and laid the knife down beside the vegetables. “I received a visitor today.”

“Who?” He moved from one side of my neck to the other.

“Bethany.”

Casimir immediately released me and spun me around to face him.

“What the fuck did she want?”

I sighed. “To warn me to stay away from you. She gave me an ultimatum. If I leave you alone, she will leave me alone. If I don’t, she’ll send a formal letter of complaint about my unethical behavior to the Georgia State Board.”

The furious clench of his jaw, the balled fists, and the stiff way he held his shoulders did nothing to erase the look of panic in his eyes.

“What did you tell her?” he asked.

“Does it really matter, Casimir? I’ve told you a thousand times how important my license is to me.”

“Do you love me?” he asked with desperation in his eyes and voice.

“Of course, I love you, Cas, but baby, I love me too.”

“Then we can work through this if you have faith in me.”

“It’s not that I don’t have faith in you, Cas. It’s that I know what’s at stake here, and you cannot control that woman. She has a vendetta against me, and she won’t stop until she gets her revenge. So, if this is what I need to do to protect myself, then I’m moving out.”

“What? Where are you going to go?”

“My friend’s house. It’s what I should have done from the start. I let my lust for you and desire to escape my grief and loneliness convince me to stay here when I knew that it was wrong.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

“Come on, Giselle. You don’t have to do this, baby.”

“No, I do. My bags are already packed in my car. I just wanted to give you the respect of telling you in person rather than you coming home to find the place empty.”

“You stay. I can leave.”

“No. It’s how we tried to work it out the first time, but you couldn’t stay away. As long as I’m here, you’ll be too tempted to return, Cas.”

“Giselle, baby, we’re better than this,” he argued and placed his hands on either side of my face.

“Maybe we are, maybe we aren’t. Maybe we were only designed to be a hot spark that quickly fizzled out in the first place.”

“You don’t believe that,” he growled as he looked into my eyes.

“I do,” I lied.

Casimir crushed my lips with his and took my breath away. He was making this harder than it had to be with every argument, kiss, and touch. I wanted just to walk away earlier and leave him a note, but I knew that wasn’t fair.

But now it seemed like that would have been the perfect thing to do. It would have been the easier thing to do rather than fighting the feelings we both felt. Yet, it was

also the coward's way out, and I wasn't a coward.

When he stepped back and stared into my eyes again, it was like he was hoping to see an instant change there. Whatever he saw caused him to drop his hands from my face and his shoulders to slump.

"Are you really going to do this?" he asked in a resigned tone.

"I have no choice, Casimir. We both know that we never should have been."

"Yes, you do!" He banged his fist on the counter and made the knife fall to the floor with a clatter. I jumped, and he threw his hands on top of his head. He spun around, swiped the vegetables onto the floor, and shouted, "Fuck!"

I turned and walked out of the kitchen. Grabbing my keys and purse from the bedroom I'd been staying in, I rushed to the door. Not because I was scared of Casimir but because I knew that we wouldn't get anywhere this way.

The tears that pricked my eyes were threatening to fall. I never wanted to hurt Casimir, but I also couldn't make us work when it wasn't meant to be. If he saw me crying, then he would know that I was hurting, too, and he might try to change my mind. If he did that, I was certain that my resolve would waver, especially when I knew I had hurt him.

I walked back to the front of the house and didn't see him in the kitchen. When I grabbed the doorknob, I heard him behind me. I guess he had been either in the living room or the den.

"You're just gonna walk out without saying goodbye? You ain't gotta run from me, Giselle. I won't ever hurt you."

“I know,” I replied in a shaky voice.

“Then why you gotta be hurting me, baby?”

I inhaled deeply and whispered a prayer for God to give me the strength to walk out that door.

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled.

“Yeah, so am I. So am I,” Casimir repeated just as I stepped out of the door.

The elevator couldn’t arrive fast enough as I punched the button. I prayed that he wouldn’t come out of the apartment after me. The doors opened, and I called down to the front desk.

“Hello, this is Dr. Champagne from apartment 20 B. Would you please have my car brought back around front?” I asked.

“Yes, Dr. Champagne. It will be brought back in a few minutes.”

“Thank you.”

I ended the call, and all too soon, I had reached the lobby. I rushed past the reception desk, ignoring the greeting that was called out. When I stepped outside, one of the valet attendants greeted me. “Hey, Dr. Champagne.”

I waved but didn’t trust myself to speak.

“DeMarco should be back any second with your car,” the young man stated.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

“Thank you,” I managed to mutter without bawling.

When DeMarco pulled up a couple of minutes later, I thanked and tipped him, jumped inside my car, and peeled off. I drove until I reached the parking lot of a music store. They had already closed for the evening, and there was no one in the lot.

I pressed my forehead against the steering wheel, and I broke.

Casimir

I had never been a sap-ass nigga, but Giselle’s absence had me ready to sing Luther’s “A House is Not a Home.” Five days had passed since she left me, and she wasn’t taking my calls or texts. As much as I wanted to drive to her job, I wouldn’t put Imani in the uncomfortable position of trying to make excuses for Giselle, and I wouldn’t pressure Giselle while she was at work.

I put the weights down and leaned forward with my elbows on my knees. All the early morning jogging, late nights in the office, and boring reading throughout the night hadn’t helped a thing. I was restless and could not sleep. I wanted my Elle in my bed and my arms, and I wouldn’t be satisfied until she was back where she belonged.

“Aye, you good, G?” Jude asked from the bench beside me.

He had come to work out at our gym. He had a free membership because he was messing around with the woman who owned the building. He sat up and removed his AirPods from his ears.

“Yeah, just thinking about money moves,” I lied.

“Or more likely about honey moves.”

I slanted my gaze his way and rolled my eyes.

“Too soon for that?” Jude asked and chuckled.

“What you think?”

“I think you need to go get your woman back.”

“That’s just it. I have no idea where she is.”

“I’m sure a brilliant and resourceful man like yourself can figure that shit out, homie. You’ve already let it go too far by not checking Beth’s ass, now you’re gonna let another week pass, and before you know it, Giselle will be singing that old ass Jody Watley song, ‘Looking For A New Love.’”

I scowled at him and asked, “How the hell do you know that old ass song?”

“Same way you do. My mama used to sing that shit all the time when I was a kid.”

“I hear you, and I want to go get her, but if she left, that means that she’s not trying to be with me.”

“That ain’t what that means at all. It means that she wants you to fight for her, protect her, and prove to her that you won’t let anybody ever get that close again. The fact that Beth felt comfortable enough rolling up on that girl’s job and threatening her is fucked up.”

“Yeah, she was wrong with that move.”

“Nah, I’m not talking about her. I’m talking about you.”

“I had nothing to do with what Beth did.”

“I’m saying, nigga, you didn’t impress upon old girl how important Giselle was to you. She didn’t get the memo that you don’t play ’bout that one. If she had, she never would have tried it. She felt too comfortable rolling up there, and that’s all because you never secured your woman. You never put the message out about how you really feel about her and what you would do to anyone who tried to step to her. Beth’s probably looking at that girl like she’s just a random girl you fuck around with.”

“No, she knows me better than that.”

“Or does she? All I’m saying is that it’s time for you to send the message out. Beth’s ass is out of pocket, and she needs to be checked.”

“I hear you.”

“You’d better do more than hear me. You need to handle your shit, big homie.”

“I know. But Giselle is on some ethical shit. I honestly believe it goes past her license. I think she’s worried about how it looks, period. She was my marriage counselor, and now she’s involved with me.”

“It doesn’t matter what it looks like. Sometimes, you can’t help the way you feel about a person, and yes, it might be messed up, but that’s how it happened. She’s who you fell in love with, and you’re who she fell in love with. You can’t always base your heart’s desires on what society says that you should do. You can only be the best that you can be and follow your heart. I personally think the two of you are a good

look for each other.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

“Why is that?”

“Everything you told me about this girl, and everything that I know about you, says you belong together. You both were married and gave your all to the marriage, only to be hurt by the person you trusted most. Whether it was Beth playing in your face and taking you for granted or Giselle’s husband committing suicide, their actions hurt you. You both are good people who deserve better than that. I can’t think of a better person for you to find healing, wholeness, and love with and vice versa.”

I looked at my old friend and smirked. “Look at your ass spouting wisdom.”

He shrugged. “Just saying.”

I stood and wiped my face with my hand towel.

“Where you going?” he asked.

I smirked. “To put shit in play to get my woman back. I’m about to tear down Beth’s house of cards.”

After my shower, I headed into my bedroom and made a phone call.

“Travis, what’s good?”

“Nothing much. Just counting down the days to go time is all.”

“D-day is today. Let’s do this.”

“Wait. I thought you said it was happening in two weeks?”

“No. I want it done now. I gave the warning, and they didn’t back down.”

“What the hell happened between today and two weeks ago?”

“Beth happened.”

“Aw damn. What did the Ice Princess do now?”

Travis had always called my wife that. He said that she had no heart, gave a shit about nothing, and could stand outside butt naked in the middle of a blizzard, and her ass would still be just as tan and hot as if she stepped out of Jamaica.

“She visited Giselle and threatened her.”

“I know old Bethany Perez ain’t threatened to put her hands on nobody.”

“No. Beth wouldn’t dare do that. She would hire someone to do it for her. Instead, she went straight for the jugular. She threatened Giselle that if she didn’t leave me alone, she would report her unethical behavior to the state examiners and psychologists board.”

“Damn. She’s fighting ugly.”

“She is. The Senator called today issuing threats about exposing Giselle on the news.”

“Fuck.”

“If this is the fight they want, then that’s the fight they’ll get. I want all of that shit

released tonight, including the tapes.”

“Word? You taking the whole family down in one blow?”

“Damn straight.”

“So, the same sources that we previously discussed?”

“Yeah . . . Send them to CNN, NBC, and Fox. Those bitches will be singing a different tune tomorrow this time.”

I hated fighting fire with fire, and usually, I could ignore stupidity. But this wasn't about me. This was about Giselle. She hadn't asked to be dragged into the ongoing battle between Bethany and me. I knew that if I didn't put a stop to it now, she would keep on. If there was any chance of me getting Giselle back, then I needed to end this game now.

“All right, C. I'm on it now.”

“Call me when it’s done.”

“I will. Sit tight and chill and worry about how you’re gonna make peace with that woman. Jude told me she was fine as hell and a good one at that. You don’t want to mess up something like that.”

“I know. That’s why I’m doing this.”

“Be easy, Cas.”

“A’ight.”

No sooner than I hung up the phone, I called my father.

“Casimir, it’s been a while. What’s on your mind, son?”

“Nothing. Listen, I know that the last time that we spoke, I came off extremely defensive about my choices.”

“No. Before you go down that road, let me stop you. Your mother and I have been talking about this since the day that you came by and told me about the divorce. I owe you an apology, son.”

Those words took me aback, and I bowed my head and ran my hand over it. I sat on the edge of the bed, wondering if I misheard him.

“For what?”

“The way that I reacted when you told me you were divorcing her.”

“You didn’t trip, Dad.”

“No, I didn’t. But I also didn’t give you my unwavering support, nor did I thank you for how you handled the entire situation. From the moment that your mother and I came to you about you marrying Beth, you weren’t happy about it, and I should have considered that. Instead, I pushed my will on you, and you did what I asked of you. From the minute that you agreed you never complained one time. I had no right to do that to you, and for that, I’m sorry.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“I’ve seen how unhappy you’ve been through the years, but I turned my head the other way and ignored it for my selfish reasons. Again, I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve that. Do you forgive an old man?”

“Of course, Dad. It was just time for me to make a stand for my happiness. I had to get out before Beth and I started hating one another. And at this point, I’m not sure that we don’t already feel that way.”

“I hoped that you two could end it amicably.”

“It’s too late for that.”

“Why?”

“She found out that I was involved with someone else.”

“Someone like who?”

“Someone that she and I both have in common.”

“Like?”

“Our marriage counselor.”

“Son. Are you serious? Did this woman in any way manipul—”

“No, Dad! She’s not like that. If anything, I manipulated her. She didn’t want to become involved with me for a number of reasons. Not the least of which was the fact that I was married.”

“Were you involved with her while you were married to Beth?”

“No. I never shared my feelings with her until after our divorce was official. Then I pursued her like I’d lost my mind. It didn’t matter though. She was still against it because of her license. Eventually, she gave in to me, but now all that doesn’t matter. She’s broken things off.”

“Why?”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

“Beth visited her and gave her an ultimatum. Either she ends things with me, or she would report her to the board for unethical behavior so that she could lose her license.”

“My God.”

“I know, Dad.”

“What can I do? Should I call Greg?”

“No. Don’t worry about it. I’m handling it.”

Greg Sorenson was married to the president of the Georgia State Board of Examiners of Psychologists. He also happened to be good friends with my father, and his wife was my mother’s best friend.

“Are you sure? Because I don’t mind putting in a call.”

“I’d rather handle things on my own using my tactics before I call in a favor with them. I’d like to look at them as a last resort.”

“Okay, whatever you say, Casimir. Let me know if there’s any other way that I can help.”

“I will, Dad. I just wanted to call to make sure that you and I were okay.”

“Son, I would never allow anything or anyone to come between us. You’re my son,

and I love you, and I'm damn sure proud of you."

"Thanks, Dad."

I had finally shared information about my businesses with my parents when they began to worry about my financial status.

"I hope that we'll get to meet this special lady someday soon."

"If I can convince her to come back to my team, the very next thing I will do is bring her to meet you two."

"Good."

"Okay, Dad. I have to go. I've got some more loose ends to wrap up."

"Okay. Love you, son."

"Love you, too, and tell Mama I love her too."

We ended the call, and I lay back on my bed to breathe for a moment and think about what I wanted to do to convince Giselle to come back to me.

Casimir

Three Days Later

". . . a

re down. This latest discovery will surely have a larger impact on their stock prices, Ned."

“Yes, Darla. It seems that former COO Casimir Perez got out just in time before everything spiraled downward.”

“This isn’t a good look for Glenco Energy at all. The incumbent COO, Will Jennings, will have his hands full trying to save this company from the brink of destruction and assist CEO, Senator Rob Bradwell, with cleaning up the company’s image.”

“I doubt that he’ll be able to do that. His background shows that he has experience in turning failing companies around, Ned, but this isn’t just a failure of catastrophic proportions. This spells doomsday for the company. Board chairman Preston Willcott, CEO, Senator Rob Bradwell, James Carson, the COO of Carson Gas and Electric, and Peter Tinsdale, the COO of Carson Gas and Electric, were all in this meeting.”

“People, if you’re just tuning in, we’re discussing the release of taped conversations between the heads of two major energy and gas companies in the country that have been colluding to boost energy prices. We all remember the energy blackouts we’ve experienced over this last summer. Well, it seems that they weren’t just some random acts of failure, but a planned strategy to spike energy prices across the country,” Darla Samuels, the reporter, informed newcomers to the channel.

“It won’t happen overnight, but this will surely spell the end of Glenco and Carson, making room for Tandem and Powerhouse to become the top energy and gas providers in the country,” Ned Evers explained. “And it’s all on the heels of those pictures of Senator Bradwell and lobbyist Anne Partham coming out.”

I switched the TV off and spun around in my seat. A wry smile twisted my lips as I stared at my ex-wife, who fumed in the chair across from my desk.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

“I know that it was you behind all of this, Casimir!”

“I had nothing to do with this, sweetheart. It seems that your father and a few of these men have crossed up the wrong enemy, and it ain’t me, darlin’. If I were you, I would check with that lobbyist your father was having an affair with. Didn’t you tell me that he forced her to have an abortion?”

Bethany fumed as she bolted out of her seat. “This isn’t over, Casimir. You may not have done all of this, but I know that your hands aren’t clean in it either.”

“Oh, it’s over, Beth.”

“It’s not over until I say it’s over.”

“Is that what you think?” I asked as I slid a yellow envelope across the desk to her.

Bethany glanced down at the envelope and then back at me. “What’s this?”

“Open it.”

She lifted the envelope with trembling fingers and carefully opened it. When she removed the pictures, her tanned face turned pale, and her eyes widened. She looked back up at me and asked, “How could you?”

“I think that’s the question that I should be asking. After all, we were married when you started this little affair.”

She looked up at me.

I jutted my chin at the pictures and smirked. “Keep going.”

She flipped through the pictures and her face grew even paler as she realized how far back they went. Bethany had cheated on me the night before our wedding and the night of our wedding. The night of our wedding, she left our hotel room to have one final “goodbye drink” with her friends. She never met up with her friends but slipped me to have a rendezvous on another floor of our hotel room.

One of her friends, who was all too eager to try to slip in the room with me that night, was more than happy to provide pictures of Bethany and the man she’d been having an affair with. It was her way of proving why I should cheat on my “new wife.” I hadn’t gone for it, but I had texted the pictures to myself while I held the friend’s phone.

Although our marriage was arranged, we both agreed to be faithful and make our union work. We agreed to have sex only with each other.

“Those pictures of you on your knees in your wedding dress would be a very compelling story to share with the media about how America’s princess gets down.”

“Where did you get these?”

“That’s no longer relevant. I heard that you were in the business of negotiations now. So, let’s talk about prices.”

The fury in her eyes was real, and her lips thinned out, but she spoke no words.

“Leave. Giselle. Alone.”

“Is that what you’re asking in order for you not to share those pictures?”

“That’s it. I know that you’re planning to marry Senator Dennis Oaks. You can let the world know that you were cheating with him during your first marriage and his, destroy his career, or you can mind ya business and live a happy life with him. And remember, it doesn’t stop at just destroying his career. Don’t forget who he’s married to. There’s a penalty for that type of betrayal in their world, Beth. It’s your choice, really.”

“All this for her?”

I smirked. “One day, I hope you learn the meaning of true love, Beth. And I hope you find your happiness.”

She snatched the packet, turned around, and headed for the door.

“Oh, and Beth?”

She turned back and glared at me.

“I just want you to know that the same way your lawyer is holding on to that letter for you, my attorney and Giselle’s attorney are holding on to the original and copies of those pictures. We even have some audio and videos that accompany them.”

“You wouldn’t.”

I shrugged.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

“Play the game of Russian Roulette if you dare. I won’t be the loser in that one, sweetheart,” I replied with a wink.

I stood and quickly moved behind her.

“You may want to watch your back and tell your father to watch his. Those thug-ass friends of mine you despised so much . . . they’re back in my life. And one or two are in prison.”

Her eyes widened in horror. I watched as she walked out the door and slammed it behind her. I had called Bethany and demanded that she meet me today. I told her to meet me at the hotel and to stop by the front desk, and they would direct her to where I was. She assumed that we would be meeting in a room, but I wasn’t about to screw up my good thing at home.

I met with her in a conference room around the corner from my office. She had no idea that I owned the hotel, and I had no plans on letting her know that. Not anytime soon, anyway.

I stood and headed out of the conference room and hopped in my car. My first stop was at an undisclosed location in the woods. When I exited my vehicle, I took a look around as I had done the entire drive to make sure I wasn’t followed.

I walked to the cabin and knocked twice before the door immediately opened.

“Travis.”

“Cas.”

We dapped it up before I took a seat on his worn gray and white couch.

“Everything work out for you?”

“Everything went according to plan. Those pictures blew her ass away. Thanks, man.”

“Any time. I knew all those years ago when you first connected with that family that they weren’t nothing but trouble.”

“And you told me that.”

“Glad your ass listened,” he replied and pulled two beers out of the refrigerator. He handed me one and then dropped into his recliner and popped open the other one.

We sat in silence for a while, drinking our beers, and although a basketball game played on TV, I suspected he didn’t watch it.

“I checked out your new girl,” he finally spoke up.

“Impressed with what you see?”

He sighed and set his beer down.

“I am. She’s had a hard time of it, man. She’s close to her family and friends but not close to her husband’s family. It seems like he wasn’t close to them anyway, so she didn’t see a need to keep up the relationships once he died.”

“Yeah, I figured as much.”

“I spoke with Beth’s attorney earlier.”

“Yeah?”

Travis nodded. “He destroyed the letter.”

“Thanks.”

“I saw that Nathaniel dropped those bombs,” Travis stated.

“That company’s about to shut the fuck down. Ain’t a gahdamn thing they can do to save it either. Feds already up in that bitch investigating everything.”

“And your name cleared, man?”

“Yep. Thanks to all those memos that got leaked to the Feds and not the press, I’m all good. They spoke with my attorney yesterday, and my shit is on the up and up.”

Travis Cunningham, a private investigator, was also a childhood friend. His father was a retired CIA operative who worked closely with my father in their glory days. Travis was the one who obtained the pictures of Bethany’s affair throughout our four-year marriage. His brother, Nathaniel, worked as an administrator at Carson, and he had been the one to record those meetings. It was Nate’s duty to set the conference rooms up for meetings. With Travis’s help, he was able to get some bugs and bugged the conference rooms and executive offices at Carson.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

When I'd initially cut them off to marry into the Huffington-Bradwell clan, they were dead set on proving to me that I had made a bad decision. In the beginning, I ignored them. But after two years, at Jude's urging, I hooked up with my boys again. I didn't let anyone know that I was friends with them again, but in time, they were able to give me enough information to prove that the Huffington-Bradwells didn't have my best interests at heart.

In fact, they were able to convince me that Bethany's family was using me as a scapegoat to swindle millions of customers on a larger scheme than the one they'd been caught conducting.

"I'm glad your ass got out before you did get stuck with kids. You got out fairly easy for this one, especially considering who you were involved with," Travis stated before he took another swing of his beer.

"I know. I damn sure dodged a bullet on that shit."

"This doctor you're dating has a clean record across the board, and she hasn't been involved with anyone since her husband."

"I already know, man."

"You ran record checks on her?"

"No," I stated and stood. I turned my beer bottle up and finished it off. "She told me these things, and I trust her word."

It felt good to be able to say that because I had never trusted Bethany.

I dapped Travis up, and we said our goodbyes before I hopped in the car and headed out.

Giselle

“Honestly, honey, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you like this,” Eriss declared.

“I’m fine. Truly, I am,” I replied as I dabbed my eyes with the tissue.

“Mm-hmm. That’s why I’m opening a second box of tissues for your ass,” Raegan stated dryly as she peeled the tab off the box and handed me another tissue.

“It’s better for her to get it out than hold it in,” Eriss chided Raegan.

“You mean like she did with Eli’s ass?” Raegan asked.

“Shh . . . You know we don’t—”

“It’s okay, Riss. Rae, say what needs to be said because God knows that I don’t want to spend another few years miserable while you heffas walk on eggshells around me because you’re afraid you’ll hurt my feelings,” I declared and balled another handful of tissues up and tossed them in the overflowing trash can Eriss had pulled up beside my lounge chair.

We were out by the pool to have some privacy. I had come to stay with Eriss and Aydan since leaving Casimir three weeks ago.

I hadn’t contacted Jude and asked him to help me find a new place. I had found another realtor altogether with my sister’s help, and I would be making an offer on a

house tomorrow. My realtor told me to sleep on it because she didn't believe that I was completely sold on that one. She thought I was settling on something out of desperation because I had yet to find something that I loved.

Eriss had called Raegan over tonight when I had fallen into a crying session that I couldn't seem to stop. It was the simple things that triggered me these days, and I didn't know how to stop the tears.

Tonight, it had been Aydan's mentioning that he was going to watch a basketball game after dinner. It reminded me of the nights when Casimir had done the same thing. I slipped out of the kitchen and came outside, where Eriss had found me five minutes later. She had tried everything in her power to comfort me, but when nothing worked, she called Raegan's goofy self over to help calm me down.

It was almost impossible to be sad in Raegan's presence because she always had something crazy to say that would either make you laugh, blush, or want to curse her out.

"You really like this dude, don't you?" Raegan asked.

"Of course, she does. Otherwise, she wouldn't be crying, Rae," Eriss answered for me, like "duh."

"I'm just saying because she's not just in her feelings. She's hurting bad, kind of like she had been when she lost Eli," Raegan stated compassionately.

"I love Cas, Rae," I whimpered.

"Damn. That was fast."

"I know. That's part of the problem. I feel like we moved too fast. Casimir was my

client, and he'd just gotten out of a marriage himself. He hadn't had time to heal. What if I turned out to be nothing more than a rebound?"

"Or what if he didn't treat you as a rebound, sis? What if you were the one to hurt him?" Raegan asked. "We're always trying to protect our hearts, but brotha's out in these streets risking life and limb to be that nigga, and sometimes we get in the way and won't let them be that one we claim we want," Raegan explained.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

I looked at Eriss, who turned her lips down and shrugged.

“All I’m saying is that this guy was a good guy to you. He gave you a beautiful home, fully furnished and stocked. You didn’t have to worry about bills, groceries, or anything. He took care of your heart, your home, and your body. All you had to do was let him love you.”

“But my license, Rae? It was in jeopardy.”

“And from what you’ve told us, he was going to take care of that too. You should’ve let his ass pull through and be who he said he was gonna be.”

“Rae, she can’t be risking her license over a Cap ‘N’ Save-A-Ho who may or may not come through.”

“Hey,” I called out and whipped my head in Eriss’s direction.

“Sorry. Not calling you a ho.”

I turned my attention back to Raegan, who, for once, was making sense.

“I’m just saying that you ran too easily. You gave up too easily. Love is worth fighting for, honey, and it won’t always come easily. If that man promised that he was going to take care of that ho you should’ve let him do that. Hell, if you hadn’t, then we could’ve come in and handled that trick ourselves,” Raegan stated.

Eriss raised her hand, and we turned our gaze on her. “Uhm, I don’t know about you,

but I can't fight," Eriss stated in a tiny voice as she twisted the short hairs in her kitchen at the nape of her neck.

Raegan and I burst out laughing.

"Heffa, we know your ass can't fight. I wasn't talking about you, boo. I was talking about bringing my cousins, Daishelle, Trixie, and Junesha."

"Oh, Lord," Eriss whispered and lifted her glass to her lips again.

"Maybe I did overreact in the moment. I just felt like I'd gone so far into this thing, and I couldn't see up from down. When I'm with Casimir, I can't see anything else. I can't figure out what's right or wrong. All I see and want is him," I explained.

"Yeah, we know."

"What's that mean, Riss?"

"You kinda dissed your girls while you were staying with him."

"I'm sorry." I apologized, leaned sideways, and wrapped my arms around her.

"Hey, I was all for it. Anytime one of my sisters is getting their back blown out, I promise you that I'm not gonna hate. I was glad that you weren't moping around anymore," Raegan noted.

"Me, too, but we did miss you," Eriss confirmed.

"I missed you ladies too."

"Then the next time, make sure that you don't kick us out completely. Maybe let him

roll through on a date night so that we can check him out, and then you can get Aydan and Gavin's opinions on him later," Raegan stated.

"Well, that's all over. He hasn't called or texted me," I remarked sadly.

"Well, you did walk out on the man. After all, who wants to keep getting rejected?" Raegan replied.

"She does have a point," Eriss agreed.

"Thank you, boo," Raegan stated and blew a kiss at Eriss.

It was seldom my friends agreed on anything.

"Just text him and ask if the two of you can talk," Eriss suggested.

"What if he doesn't respond?" I asked.

Shrugging, Raegan stated, "Well, at least you know that you tried. I mean, you've already rejected him. Don't get mad if you get a taste of your own medicine."

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

“You’re right.”

We talked some more, drank lots more, and nibbled on the snacks that Eriss had prepared before we decided to call it a night. Gavin had come over with Raegan so that she could drink and didn’t have to worry about driving home. He had gone downstairs to the man cave with Aydan to watch football.

When we finished, Raegan went downstairs to get her husband, and Eriss did the same. I retired upstairs alone with a broken heart.

I lay in the bed for several long minutes and tossed and turned, wondering if I should text Casimir or wait until the morning. He clearly had no plans to reach out to me.

I stared at my phone for the longest time and then sent him a text.

ME:Hey, can we talk?

HIM:Sure. You want me to call you now?

ME:I was thinking that maybe we should have this conversation in person.

HIM:You want me to come and get you? Where are you?

ME:Maybe not now. Besides, it’s late, and I’ve had a couple of drinks.

HIM:Where the hell are you, Elle?

ME:With friends. Safe in the home I've been staying in.

HIM:Please. Can I come to you now?

ME:It can wait until tomorrow.

HIM:I can't.

ME:You'll have to.

HIM:A'ight. I've got a few meetings tomorrow. Meet me in the evening at the Cherokee Springs Botanical Garden at six.

ME:See you there.

I had been surprised that the minute I texted him, he immediately texted back. I thought it might be a minute before he responded, if he responded at all. My heart leaped inside of my chest at the thought that he was missing me as much as I had missed him.

I was startled when, a few moments later, my phone rang. I saw that it was Casimir FaceTiming me.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“I thought we were waiting until tomorrow,” I stated and bit my bottom lip.

“I told you I couldn't wait. Even if we don't have the conversation tonight, I wanted to see you.”

“Okay.”

“I miss you, Elle.”

“Really? What do you miss?”

“The way that you feel underneath me, on top of me, in my arms. I miss our conversations, dinner together, your laughter, and your scent. I miss all that. I miss the way you taste, Elle.”

“You act like we’ve been together forever.”

“The first sample of you is enough to get a man addicted. And that’s not even talking about how sweet you taste, those pouty lips, or your southern lips.”

I giggled.

“Why do you look so sad, Elle?”

“I told you. I’ve missed you. I know that you think it was easy for me to just walk out the way that I did, but it wasn’t. It was a hard decision that I felt the need to make.”

“And now?”

“Now, I’ve come to realize that I made a hasty decision without thinking things through. I panicked, and I, of all people, know that it’s never a good thing to respond in a panic.”

“Mmm.”

“What does that mean?”

“Just that we all do things we regret.”

“Have you? Recently, I mean.”

“Yeah. I’ve had a lot of regrets, starting with you walking out that door. But I also regret that I didn’t send a definitive message that you weren’t to be fucked with.”

“And have you sent a message?”

The devious look in his eyes, the chuckle he released, and the way he winked hit me

deep down below.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, beautiful.”

We ended the call, and finally, I could sleep.

Casimir

“Has my guest arrived yet?”

“No, sir, Mr. Perez.”

I nodded. “Okay. Please alert me when she arrives.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Perez.”

I walked past the reception desk and headed out of the large double doors. After I passed the bird sanctuary, I headed down the wooded trail for another couple of minutes before I came to a clearing. I smiled at the fairy lights strung through the trees, which created a canopy all its own. A white linen tablecloth-covered table stood in the middle of the clearing to the right of a large fountain with hydrangeas blooming from the top. A vase of cherry blossoms and two single candle tapers were the only table décor: simple but elegant.

Blue orchid blossoms bloomed all around us. There were large planters of various plants further away from our table, and benches where visitors could sit and enjoy the view.

My phone buzzed, and I checked the message before I set it down again. I leaned back in my seat, stretched my legs out, and crossed them at the ankles and closed my eyes.

I listened to the trill of the birds, the sprinkling of the water at the fountain beside me, and finally, the reassuring clicking of heels coming down the paved sidewalk.

I continued resting with my eyes closed as I thought about all that I had gone through to bring me to this day. My life was almost destroyed because I had submitted to someone else's vision for my life. Thankfully, I met a woman who opened my eyes and made me want to take control of my life again. I learned a valuable lesson. This life wasn't all about money or pleasing someone else, but it was about being the best person we were for the space and time we were in.

“Hi.”

“Hello, beautiful,” I greeted and opened my eyes.

Giselle wore a long orange and white floral print dress, and her hair was a beautiful cloud that made a halo around her face. She held her wild poof of hair back by a rhinestone headband.

I stood and held her chair out for her and pushed her in again after she sat down.

“I was excited when you told me to meet you at the botanical garden. Never in a million years would I have expected this,” Giselle declared and waved her arms around her.

“A private, intimate dinner so we can talk about us,” I replied.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

She rested her chin on her clasped fingers and stared at me over them.

I reached across the table and took her hands in mine.

“Thank you for meeting me,” she stated.

“You’re welcome.”

“I wanted to talk about us, Cas.”

“Is this a good talk or a bad one?”

“A necessary one. As I said last night on the phone, I reacted too quickly. I didn’t give myself a chance to process the conversation between Bethany and me, determine what was the best solution, or even give you a chance to handle it. I was still upset about you allowing her to give you oral sex, and I freaked out.”

“You had every right to be upset, baby. You’ve been an independent woman for a long time. You’ve built something solid and strong, and I admire that. I admire you for wanting to have your own thing and not want someone else to take care of you. But mostly, I admire you for not laying down and letting something be taken from you.”

“But I did,” she replied softly.

“What?” I asked. I couldn’t imagine what else she had allowed to be taken from her.

“You. I didn’t fight for you the way you deserved to be fought for. I let Bethany take you from me like you weren’t worth anything. And yet, in these last three weeks, I’ve come to realize that you’re worth everything to me, Cas.”

“You did what you felt needed to be done, Giselle. No one can fault you for that. If anything, you did the only thing you knew to do. Most people would have done the same thing.”

“Yeah, but it cost me three weeks of loving you.”

“Let’s consider it three weeks of growth and confirming what we really want.”

She smiled bright and beautifully at me, and the rays of her smile warmed the cold depths of my heart.

“I like how you think, Mr. Perez.”

“Thank you.”

“But it wasn’t just that. I was scared too. I have been afraid of moving on from my past and letting it go. I was afraid to take a chance on love again because I didn’t want to get hurt. I didn’t want to lose another person and fall into depression because I couldn’t live without them. And you’re someone I could find myself getting lost in, Cas.”

“Wouldn’t it be beautiful if we were to get lost in each other? Just as easily as you’re falling, so am I. Which also means that I’m taking the same risk of getting hurt. It hurt me that you didn’t trust me enough to handle this situation for you, but at the same time, I understood. You placed a lot on the line to be with me. Of the two of us, you had the most to lose. I only had my heart to risk, but you also could have lost your license, your business, and your livelihood. And here I am building my future

stronger, day by day. I get it.”

“At first, I worried that I might be a rebound and that I could get hurt. I felt that you were moving too fast in your pursuit of me.”

“What changed your mind?”

“Considering that your marriage to Bethany was arranged, and it wasn’t something that either of you seemed fully committed to. Your commitment was simply to satisfy a need your father thought needed to be filled, and you hoped that you would get what you wanted and needed out of it. You were settling in a sense.

“I never sensed a deep, passionate love between you two. Couples come into my office broken all the time, but I still can feel the tenderness they have toward each other and that desire to be whole with one another. I can still feel the love. I never felt that with you two. And that was before I developed feelings for you.”

“Your feelings were on point. I just want to know, are you invested in giving me your all now?”

She lowered her gaze briefly before she looked back up at me. There was a resolve in her eyes that I never saw before. “I am.”

“Thank you. Because I need that, for us to remain strong. On another front, I’ve got news.”

“About?”

“Your situation regarding your license. I wanted you to know that everything is settled. It has been taken care of. You never have to worry about anyone coming for you again.”

“What did you do?”

I smiled reassuringly at her and replied, “Your man handled business, baby. Now, can we eat?”

She smirked and shook her head.

“Actually, I’m starving. I skipped lunch today,” Giselle shared.

I signaled the man who stood on the other side of the fountain just out of sight. Within a matter of minutes, we were served braised lamb shanks, a creamy risotto, and seared endive and asparagus with a Tahini dressing.

We ate in silence for a while before I spoke up.

“One of the things that never came out in our therapy sessions was that Bethany cheated on me.”

Giselle choked and reached for her glass of water. Our chairs were seated close together, so I reached over and gently patted her back until she was calm again.

“Are you serious? On top of everything else? You never told me that.”

“I know. But you shouldn’t be surprised. Bethany is capable of a lot. She was cheating with a married senator, who happened to be a constituent of her father’s. It started before we were married and continued throughout the marriage. She cheated the night before our wedding and on our wedding night.”

“Oh. Wow. When did you find out?”

“The night of our wedding. One of her friends showed me pictures of her slipping into a hotel room that the senator reserved for their little indiscretions. Apparently,

this had been going on for some time, and that was their rendezvous point. That was also why she selected the hotel as the site of our reception.”

“Why would her friend show you those pictures?”

“She had her self-interests. Me.”

“Did you cheat with her?”

“No. Believe it or not, I remained faithful to Beth our entire marriage. Until you.”

“You didn’t cheat with me. We didn’t become intimately involved until after your divorce—unless . . .”

“No. I was divorced. But . . . we did have what you women like to call an emotional affair.”

She sighed. “Affairs of the heart.”

“How could I not help but love you?” I asked.

“Same.”

We ate a little more before she asked her next question.

“Did you confront Bethany?”

“Nope. I chose to keep that tidbit to myself until I might need it.”

“Until you might need it?”

“Elle, I understood from the beginning that I was marrying into a political family. I knew nothing was as it seemed.”

“You expected to use that information one day.”

“I expected to protect myself in the event that I might need it.”

“That’s awful.”

“Life is what it is. We make our choices, and we have to live with them.”

“But you were hurt through it all.”

“And so were you, but you survived. We both have been hurt because of other people’s decisions, Giselle, specifically our spouses, whom we pledged to love and honor forever. But life had other plans. I only hope that we can move forward from here and find love and healing with each other.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

She smiled sweetly at me, and she replied, “You want to know something?”

“What’s that?”

“I seldom think of Elijah anymore. Since I’ve been with you, there are some days that he might pop up in my mind, but it is no longer with the regret and the heartache that once existed. I no longer feel as if I cannot breathe or go on without him. I think about the sorrow that he carried and the depression, and my heart aches about that for him, but I don’t relate it to my life anymore. It’s a part of my past, but my future feels so bright, Cas. And I have you to thank for that.”

I reached across the table and fingered her wrist. “I didn’t expect to ever find true love. I knew that Bethany was incapable of being and giving me what I needed, so for a while, I simply accepted what was. As time wore on, I knew that I deserved and wanted better and more. When you listened to me the way that you did and understood me, I knew that it was possible to have that. But as much as I was attracted to you, I knew that you were my doctor, so it was expected that you would understand me.

“I didn’t read too much into it. But every appointment, every interaction, and every conversation drew me in more. I saw the sadness in your eyes and heard it in your voice some days, and I wondered who put it there, why, and what I could do to erase it. You seemed like too good a person to have to suffer with that type of pain.”

“I’m glad that you didn’t walk away or give up, Cas. Although, I do worry that someday this might come back to bite me.”

“Never. No one knew that I was a patient of yours except for my wife and Imani. Like I said before, I doubt Imani will speak on it, and I know that Beth won’t. I have secured that by sharing with her something that she doesn’t want to come out.”

“What’s that?”

“The senator she was involved with was Senator Dennis Oaks.”

“Thee Senator Dennis Oaks? Married to Pamela Jasper-Oaks of the Jasper oil magnate family? The same family with known mob ties?”

“Exactly. The Bradwells and Huffingtons are no match for the Jaspers.”

“Wow. Beth surely knows how to choose her enemies, doesn’t she?”

“Exactly. I confronted her with proof of that affair. She knows that I have proof, my lawyer has proof, and so does your lawyer.”

“What lawyer?”

“The one I hired to represent you in case there was an issue with your license. But I’m not worried about that either. Beth won’t move forward with those allegations. Her lawyer has destroyed the letter of complaint that she wanted to file against you. And here’s the kicker . . . The president of the board is my mother’s best friend, and she and my father play golf together.”

Giselle’s jaw dropped, and she stared openly at me. I reached across and closed her mouth. “Be careful, baby, because you don’t want to catch a bee or a fly.”

She shook her head. “You are just full of surprises and never cease to amaze me.”

I shrugged. “Either way, you’re protected. I also managed to have someone erase every record that you have of Bethany and me as clients.”

“You did what?” she balked.

“I had to, Giselle. That was the only way to ensure that you were protected, and no one could come back later to make any accusations against you. So, while I knew you would be pissed, I did what was necessary, and I don’t regret it. No other patient records were accessed or bothered, but ours were deleted from every system you have. The only thing we did not access was your iPad where you keep personal notes and any physical notebooks you might have. I gave him permission to access the cloud to delete any notes that you’ve backed up from your iPad, though.”

Giselle dropped her head and shook it. “Casimir, you had no right.”

“That’s debatable. Either way, I’ll be linking you with Noah so that he can make your systems more secure. They’re not very secure right now, and pretty much any college student could hack them.”

“This isn’t making me feel good.”

“You should feel secure. Giselle, when it comes to you, there’s no limits that I won’t go. Do you trust your man?”

“I want to.”

I lifted her chin and forced her to look into my eyes. “Do you trust your man? That’s a yes or no question.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Then trust that I won’t do anything to cause you harm. I told you that I had an entire army with me. My father has so many connections it’s unbelievable. I’m not afraid to leverage them if necessary, but I didn’t. I used the contacts in my arsenal first. I will do whatever is necessary to keep you safe. Understood?”

Giselle dropped her head in her hands, and then she looked up at me.

“Yes. I love you so much.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

“Not nearly as much as I love you, woman.”

“What does your father have to say about all this?”

I released a long exhale.

“My father was disappointed about the divorce initially, but not even a couple of weeks after I disclosed it to him, he supported me. He told me that while he loved that I made certain sacrifices to honor him, he respected more that I chose to be my own man and pursue my happiness.

“And your mom?”

“She stood by my side from the beginning.”

“That’s beautiful. I love that for you.”

“Well, they want to meet you.”

She laughed. “My family wants to meet you, as well. Oh, and definitely my friends.”

“You finally told them?”

She rolled her eyes. “I might have mentioned you a time or two to my parents and my sister. My best friends? Those girls are like two bloodhounds sniffing out the truth.”

“We’ll plan something. But in the meantime, I want you to come home, Giselle. I

want you all to myself for a few days. I have lots of time to make up for.”

“That’s your home, Casimir.”

“My home is wherever you are, sweetheart.”

Her smile was soft and bright and gave me hope for a better future.

Giselle

Two Months Later

“Baby, pullleez,” I whined and stretched my fingers out. When they gripped nothing but air, I snatched the pillow from his side of the bed and placed it over my head.

“Come on, Elle.” Casimir grunted and smacked me on the ass.

When my butt stung from his hit, I tossed the pillow off my head, sat up in bed, and glared at him. “Are you kidding me right now?”

“You promised, Giselle.”

“That was before you kept me up all night binge-watching all five of the Jason Bourne movies,” I whined.

He grinned at me and crawled onto the bed. I allowed the weight of his body to push me onto my back as he wrapped his arms around me.

“Aww, baby, you know you loved those movies as much as I did,” he whispered as he kissed me along my neck and face.

“I did, but I’m sleepy now.”

“I know, and we promised brunch for everyone, and they’ll be here by eleven.”

“What time is it now?” I groaned.

“Eight.”

“That’s three hours from now.”

“And we still have to run by the Farmer’s Market to pick up the fresh salmon,” he reminded me as his hands lifted my nightshirt.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

“Bae,” I whined. “Can’t you please go get it?”

“Nope. You promised you’d go with me because you don’t like the cuts that I pick out,” Casimir replied as his fingers toyed with my nipple.

My head and my eyes may have begged for more sleep, but my body was wide awake and responsive to his touch.

“I trust your decision,” I lied as he used his knees to spread my legs apart.

They involuntarily wrapped around his back as my ass lifted off the bed. Casimir’s finger hooked into the waistband of my panties and tugged at them. I hooked my fingers inside the crotch and tugged them aside for him.

“You’re lying to me, Elle. You know what I do to bad girls who lie to me?” he asked as he shifted himself around.

“No,” I whispered as he pressed his erection against my opening.

“I fuck them, long . . . and hard,” he growled as he slipped into my wetness.

There would be no sleeping in today. My body welcomed Casimir’s takeover method as I flowered underneath him, spreading so that he could go deeper, and deeper he did go. His mouth caressed my lips gently even as he rammed himself inside of me with deep, hard, and furious thrusts.

“Ohhh, I’m sorry,” I whimpered as I took him in.

“Are you really?” he growled and nipped at the shell of my ear.

“Ohhh . . . God, no,” I moaned as he gyrated within my walls.

Casimir bit my bottom lip and licked my jawline before he moved back up to kiss me. I pumped my hips up, needing and wanting more of him. I felt that I couldn’t get enough and as if he couldn’t get close enough. No matter how deep he went or how hard he thrust, I wanted him deeper and faster, and I told him so.

“Please, Cas.”

“Please what, Elle?” He murmured against my lips.

“Give it to me harder, deeper, faster. I need you.”

“You’ve got me. That’s not what you need. Tell me what you need, baby,” he instructed before he licked along the seam of my lips.

“I need you inside of me, Cas,” I begged and worked myself all around him.

“Is your heart mine, Elle?” he asked and sucked my top lip gently and then released it.

“Always and till the end of time,” I promised.

“That’s what I like to hear,” Casimir muttered and pulled out of me.

My eyes flew open at the sudden loss of contact. Casimir grabbed my hips before I could say a word and flipped me over onto my belly. His hands grabbed my hips and lifted them into the air as he pushed my face into my pillow. He then grabbed my arms and positioned them above my head and straight out as though I were reaching

for something.

“This is the position that I want you in. No touching. No falling. No talking. Let me get deep inside of you, baby, and give you what you need.”

I nodded as he spread my legs wide and entered me from behind. The way that he filled me up and the way my arch went deeper was so rewarding and so fulfilling. Casimir maintained a tight grip on my hips as he pummeled my insides, fucking me, not sexing me. His thrusts and pumps were deep, hard, and fast, and I struggled to keep my cries inside.

A delicious sting spread across my backside, followed by his throaty, harsh command. “Give me that ass. Toss it back the way I like!”

I did exactly what he asked, working my hips tightly and circling my core around his erection. When I heard him moan, I bounced my ass and took that dick like a champion would. With every stroke he gave, I pushed my ass back against him until I heard him say, “Oh, shit, baby. I don’t know how much longer I can hold out.”

He slid a finger inside of my ass as he continued to take me over and over again. The feeling of his finger back there was complete bliss and ecstasy. I was out of my mind with delirium as he took my body to new heights.

He pulled out of me and rolled onto his back. Tapping my ass, he ordered, “Climb on top of me. I want to cum all inside of you, but I want to see your face as I do it. I want to see you cum as I fill you with my seed.”

I climbed on top of him and leaned over him to press my lips against his. Slowly, I slid down his shaft and allowed him to fill me up until it hurt so damn good.

“I love you so much, Casimir Perez,” I muttered against his lips.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

“I love you more, Dr. Giselle Champagne.” He whispered against my lips before he thrust inside of me.

My love for him knew no bounds, and the way we met had been simply a path that brought us together. Our hearts were destined to become one. I was the only one who could heal his hurting heart, and he was the only one who could teach me to love again.

I rose and positioned myself over him once more and slid down. I cried out as he filled up my insides and grasped the sheet tightly in my hands. My teeth clenched together as I threw my head back in ecstasy.

We continued thrashing wildly as we poured out our desire for one another. A desire that had been borne of confusion, hurt, and pain but had turned into something so much sweeter.

Casimir’s hands gripped my throbbing breasts, and he tugged my nipples until I leaned over him again for him to lick, suck, and bite them. He moaned his pleasure and told me, “Girl, I can’t get enough of you.”

Those words released something wild inside of me, and I sat up and planted my hands on the canvas of his chest. I rocked and took what he gave as his arousal throbbed inside of me. As I gyrated and ground myself against him, I could take no more.

“Baby, I have to cum.”

His hand smacked my ass, and he pumped harder and deeper. “Give it to me, girl.

Give it all to me,” he commanded and grabbed the back of my head.

I leaned down and kissed him again. A hot, passionate, telling kiss, which sealed the completion of the release of our passion. When I felt his hot seed filling me up, my heart burst with anticipation. We had discussed a lot of things in the last couple of months, including starting a family.

I nestled against his chest and stroked the sparse, silky hairs that clustered right in the middle. I knew every inch of his body, every scar, every line, and every muscle. I even knew the stories that came with every scar that was a part of him because I had cared enough to listen to and know his story.

“Casimir,” I called in a quiet voice.

It was almost as if I were afraid if I spoke any louder, my voice would carry throughout the city, telling all of Cherokee Springs our story. Where the other residents of the bustling city were going about their early Saturday morning, I was enjoying making sweet love on a sultry day to the man of my dreams. A man who had been my client.

“Yeah?” He stroked my hair, his large hands palming my head whenever he returned to the top.

“I’ve been thinking.”

“About?”

“I want to take a vacation, and I was wondering if there was any way that you could escape with me. I know that your business is growing, and you’ve got to be here, but I was just hoping.”

He released a deep sigh before pulling me closer into his arms. The scent of his Old Spice Pure Sport deodorant intermingled with our sweat gave off a sensual musk. I loved his scent.

“I will always make time for you and put you first, baby. How long?”

“A week.”

“Where are we going and when?”

“Negril, in three months. I have several conferences, and that will be the first time that I can get away.”

“What the hell is in Negril?” he asked, lifting his head from the pillow slightly.

I twisted my head to look up at him and smiled.

“Jamaica.”

“I know where. But why there?”

“It’s beautiful. Relaxing. Far away from prying eyes.”

He sighed again. “You can have whatever you like.”

My heart lifted slightly. . . scared to reply to his comment for fear he would change his mind, or perhaps the universe would not agree with this arrangement. There had been so many factors against us from the start that now that things were smoothing out, I was scared to dream about happy endings.

“Did you hear me, Giselle?”

“Uh, yeah . . .” I whispered with a soft breath.

“Why do you sound so uncertain?”

I eased out of his arms, propped myself up on my elbow, and stared down at him.

“I’m having a hard time believing how freely we are allowed to go out in public now.”

He lifted slightly and kissed my lips, staring at me from half-closed lids.

“I promised you that I would always love and protect you, and I meant that. I always got you, girl. I’ve got your back, and I always will.”

“Thanks, baby.” I smiled, pushing him down once more and straddling him. His was the love of a lifetime, one I had not experienced before. I was willing to go all in for him because he gave unselfishly to me. He made me feel like I was the most important thing in the world to him, something I didn’t even have with Elijah.

I could not get enough of Casimir, his hands, his love, his taste, his scent, or any parts of him. Anytime I came near him, my pheromones were off the chart, and it had been that way since the first time we met.

“Let’s get up and head out to the Farmer’s Market so we can feed these folks,” he instructed and slapped me on the ass.

“Okay,” I groaned.

“Race you to the shower!” he shouted and jumped out of bed.

“Mmkay.” I muttered and closed my eyes again.

Casimir

“If anyone has any issues with the salmon and tuna steaks, it’s Elle’s fault. She refused to go to the Farmer’s Market with me this morning,” I called out.

Everyone laughed, and it only grew louder when Giselle rebutted, “No fair! He kept me up all night and forced me to watch the Jason Bourne series.”

“That’s one of my favorite movie series,” David Champagne, Giselle’s father, called out. “This man is all right by me,” he stated with a wink as he held up his mimosa.

We were gathered in the amenities area on the tenth floor. We rented it out this morning for brunch with our family and friends. Her parents, my parents, her sister and brother-in-law, Alex; her friends, Eriss and Ayden, and Raegan and Gavin were here. My friends, Jude, Rome and the brothers, Nathaniel and Travis Cunningham, and their respective girlfriends were also in attendance.

Today was the first time we brought our family and friends together to meet each other respectively. It was a special day for all of us as our families rejoiced in seeing both Giselle and me happy. Our mothers sat aside chit-chatting, probably planning for grandchildren that they both hoped were in the near future. If the way I’d released inside of Giselle this morning, again when I returned from the Farmer’s Market, and the way I planned to after everyone left this afternoon were any indicator, we would have a family soon.

I turned my attention away from the overall group and back to the men. Our fathers were discussing the best grilling techniques while Giselle’s friends’ husbands and my friends were all gathered with me.

“Man, I’m just glad that she finally moved on with her life. Giselle’s always been a good girl with a happy spirit, but she was in a dark place for a while,” Ayden, Eriss’s husband, stated.

“Yeah, and she’s like a little sister to us. No matter what we or our women did, it wasn’t enough to pull her out of that space. We couldn’t convince her to stop blaming herself for what he did,” Gavin explained.

“Yeah, and it was a touchy subject,” Ayden added.

“Man, that’s a heavy load for anyone to carry,” Travis remarked as his brother, Nathaniel, bobbed his head.

“I’m just glad our boy is no longer with the Ice Princess.” Nathaniel chimed in and made the others laugh.

“Giselle’s a good look on you. And she’s smart and strong. Just what your ass needs to be put in check,” Jude interjected.

“Shut up.” I chuckled and mused the side of his head.

“Hey, I’m just calling it like it is. To Giselle and Casimir,” he stated, holding his mimosa up for a toast.

The rest of the men held their glasses up and chimed in with “Giselle and Casimir.” Jude’s toast was the signal to the three hired servers for today’s brunch. They immediately removed the serving trays and cleared the dishes out of the way. One of the servers walked to the table where the music was set up and changed the song that had previously been playing.

The servers stepped back as I stood and walked to the seating group where Giselle,

her sister, and the other ladies were gathered.

They stopped mid-chatter and stared at me as I smiled down at her. Two of the three servers behind me started harmonizing as the third one sang Jagged Edge's "Let's Get Married."

Giselle's eyes widened as her girls giggled, clapped, and gasped. Our mothers, who weren't sitting too far apart, held each other's hands as they beamed. My girl was shocked as she threw her hands over her mouth.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

I had already told my parents and my boys what I planned to do, and then I had gotten her father and mother's permission. I was sweating bullets as I kneeled in front of her and whispered a silent prayer that she wouldn't say no or tell me to get up.

“Our love affair has been a whirlwind and a roller coaster of emotions. You spent years wandering in circles, never thinking that you would love again. Your heart was broken and bruised, and you were too afraid to trust your judgment. On the other hand, I had treated marriage so cavalierly, as if it didn't matter or deserve the respect and honor it should be given. I had settled into the belief that no woman would ever love me the way I wanted to be loved. You proved me wrong, even when I was undeserving. We both wanted someone to love us unconditionally, Elle. You were afraid to seek it, and I was too afraid to extend it. Marriage and love aren't business contracts set up to mutually financially benefit various parties.

“They are an equal exchange of trust, respect, honor, and sacrifice. I love you, Elle, more than I could have ever believed possible. While I was busy accepting a rendition of someone else's vision of love, you were out here all along, waiting for me. I wondered why I couldn't have met you in a different lifetime because I knew that you were my soulmate. You wanted a king to lift up, and I desired a queen to protect, love, and cherish.

“If your heart feels anything like mine does, you won't worry about what people are saying about our prior roles in each other's lives or what someone else deems acceptable for marriage. If you love me the way that I know you do here . . .” I thumped my chest, “then please tell me, Giselle Angel Champagne, that you will be my wife. Tell me that you'll agree to walk this journey with me and discover how deep love truly goes. Will you marry me?” I proposed.

She glanced at her girls as tears poured down her face and then to where her father had moved to stand behind her mother. She wiped the tears from her face and sniffled as she looked back down at me.

“My heart always knew that you belonged to me. I never thought it would be possible in a million years for us to be together. But you went the distance, Casimir, to prove that I was wrong. Yes, baby. Yes, I’ll marry you.”

The servers, who had quieted down when I started to speak, rose in pitch again as I slid the ring on her finger. A fresh round of tears fell from Giselle’s eyes, and her girlfriends handed her stack after stack of tissue.

I pulled her into my arms and held her chin as I looked into her eyes. “From this day forward, baby, I only want to see you crying happy tears. You understand that?”

She nodded and cried even harder. My fingers wiped at the tears as I covered her mouth with mine and kissed my woman sweetly. Her arms wrapped around me, and her body shook as she continued to cry.

The servers launched into Kelly Price’s “He Proposed.”

“Why are you still crying, baby?”

“Because you make me so happy, Cas. And I almost missed out on this because I didn’t trust you.”

“No, baby. You just needed time because you had already been hurt once before. I knew that you would come around in time.”

“I should have always listened to my heart rather than my logic. My heart always knew that I belonged to you,” Giselle whispered.

She pushed up on her toes and kissed me again.

My heart was full and felt like it had come home. All these years, I wanted a woman who would love me for who I was, not who she wanted me to be or believed me to be, but the real man waiting inside.

This woman had taken what was broken, mended it, and gave me life.

Giselle

TWO YEARS LATER

It was a warm November day in Negril. The sun was setting over the ocean. We never made it on our original trip to Negril because I had been extremely sick all day, every day for several months. So, we decided to have our wedding in Negril.

Since we both had large, elaborate weddings the first time around, this time, we opted for a small, simple affair to celebrate our nuptials. Only our family and friends attended. Two hours had passed since I had become Mrs. Casimir Perez.

Our family and friends still partied on the beach under the canopy behind us. My husband and I escaped the festivities for some much-needed quiet time. We were both still attired in our formal wear. He had discarded his cummerbund, bowtie and jacket, and now had his shirt unbuttoned to the third button and his sleeves rolled up.

“Your pants legs are going to get wet, baby.”

“It’s okay. I can handle anything as long as you’re by my side, Mrs. Perez,” he whispered and wrapped his arm around my waist. Casimir pulled me in closer to him and set his beer bottle in the sand beside us.

I pressed my hand against his chest and pushed him back until he rested on his elbows. Sitting between his legs, I rested my head against his chest as we watched the sun's warm rays disappear over the Caribbean Ocean, dazzling the sky with radiant reds, oranges, and yellows.

“It's so beautiful, baby.”

He pulled his fingers through my hair and loosened the bun, causing it to cascade over my shoulders in a heap of curls. I wore my hair in a princess bun with a diamond tiara around it.

My wedding gown was a bold, vibrant red because Casimir had once told me that he loved me in the color red. He said that it was a bold and dramatic color that looked stunning against my dark skin.

Upon doing my research, I found that in some Asian cultures, red wedding gowns represented good luck, prosperity, and happiness. After what Casimir and I had gone through, we definitely needed our fair share of good luck and happiness. After the wedding, I removed the detachable skirt from my wedding dress and remained in a short, red fitted dress.

Casimir's hand moved lovingly up and down my thigh as the sky grew darker.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

“Beautiful, just like you, and just like our future,” he replied to my statement moments later.

“And bright,” I added, nestling closer to him.

He wrapped both arms around me and remarked, “Definitely bright. So bright we need some damn sunglasses.”

His businesses were prospering, and I couldn’t be prouder of him. My practice had grown so much that I had taken on a partner to help me with my client list. I no longer did marriage counseling and focused my services on helping grieving children and individuals instead.

I no longer spent time looking over my shoulder. Casimir’s former in-laws were not even thinking about us. His former father-in-law was still in prison for one of the biggest white-collar scandals in recent history. From my understanding, he would be in prison for another eight years. Their business had been sold off to another company that did everything possible to make the former staff, investors, and the community whole.

Bethany’s fiancé, who was also a senator, had not been as patient as Casimir had been. Not only did they have children, but they had triplets, all of whom she had carried and birthed. There was no adoption or surrogacy involved. That svelte figure she had been so proud of was now a thing of the past.

I saw her at a charity auction that her mother chaired. I overheard her conversation as she whined and complained about her husband’s refusal to hire a nanny. Her triplets

were a year old. The minute she saw me, she turned and beelined in the opposite direction.

“Hey, guys. CJ wanted to say goodnight before I took him back to our suite,” my mother said, holding our one-year-old son in her arms.

Casimir and I suspected that he had impregnated me with our son, Casimir Jr., the same night that Casimir proposed. We initially planned to marry six months after his proposal until we learned that I was pregnant. Rather than speeding up the timeline, we decided to postpone it until after the baby was born and make sure that he could be a part of the wedding ceremony.

Casimir’s heart was overwhelmed with joy when he learned that not only was I pregnant but that we were having a little boy. Casimir was prouder of his son than he was of all the businesses that he built and the wealth he amassed. Nothing could hold a candle to that little boy, who was the apple of his father’s eye.

I pushed up off my husband and stood. I reached down and grabbed his outstretched hand to pull him up too.

“Oh, come here, baby. Give mommy some sugar. I swear that I’m gonna miss you so much, little boy,” I cooed to my son.

I reached for him, and he bounced his arms up and down happily as he leaned out of my mother’s arms and reached for me. His chunky, chocolate cheeks turned up into a smile as he fell into my arms and caused me to tumble backward.

“Whoa, big guy. You trying to take your mama out?” Casimir teased and ruffled CJ’s thick curls.

“He’s okay. Just happy to see his mommy,” I cooed and kissed him on the top of his

head before I nuzzled his neck and made him giggle.

Our baby boy smelled like sun, sand, baby powder, and cherries. Cherries?

“Mama, did you give CJ some more of that chocolate cherry cake?” I asked, shifting him onto my hip and bouncing him up and down.

“Honey, it’s a celebration today. He should be allowed to celebrate the union of his parents like everyone else. Don’t go taking that tone with me. I raised you and your sister, and you both came out just fine.” My mother scolded me.

“Yeah, but you didn’t allow us to eat four slices of cake in one day,” I reminded her.

“Four? He’s had four?”

“Mama . . .” I twisted my lips and looked at her like, come on.

“What?”

“You know that I gave him a slice of cake. I saw Mama Yolanda give him a slice,” I said of Casimir’s mom. “And then I saw you give him one earlier. Now you’ve given him another one.”

“Well, I lost count,” she stated and reached for my son.

“Baby, I’m thinking we might want to keep CJ here with us instead of letting him fly back to the States with our parents,” I suggested. I didn’t mean it, but I was giving my mother the blues.

I looked at my husband over my shoulder, and he frowned.

“Woman, let me see my son.”

I handed CJ to him, and he kissed our son and squeezed him to himself.

“You gonna be a big boy while mommy and daddy are gone, CJ?” Casimir asked.

CJ bobbed his head and verbalized something that was a mixture of hums and lip-smacking.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:12 am

I looked at Casimir and giggled.

“Sounds about right, Son,” Casimir stated. “Listen, we’re going to miss you. But I need you to take very good care of your nana and pa-pa, and your abuelo and abuela. You got that?”

Again, CJ bobbed his head, and his head full of curls shook. I had seen baby pictures of Casimir, and our son was the spitting image of his father.

“I’ll miss you, little big guy,” Casimir told our son as he kissed him once more. He turned back to me and instructed our son, “Give mommy kisses.”

I grabbed my baby boy’s face and covered it with kisses before I gave him one final sweet butterfly kiss.

“Good night, my sweet prince,” I told him as Casimir handed him back to my mother.

“You all have fun and enjoy your time,” Mama said as she juggled CJ from one hip to the next.

“We will. And you all have a safe flight home,” I told her.

“Will do. Oh, and Gigi and Cas?” Mama called out after she took a couple of steps.

“Yes, ma’am?” we responded as one.

“We’ll take two or three more of him,” she said with a teasing grin as she bounced CJ

on her hip.

“Mama!”

“We’ll see what we can do, Mama Viola,” Casimir called out as my mama walked away, chuckling.

“Don’t encourage her.” I scolded him with a smack to his chest.

My husband grabbed me in his arms and pulled me close. Bending his head, he kissed my lips and asked, “When are you going to be ready to tell them about our princess on the way?”

He licked along the seam of my lips and grabbed my butt. Casimir pressed his erection at the apex of my thighs and made my body hum.

“After the honeymoon,” I moaned.

We learned that I was pregnant a month ago when I was only six weeks pregnant. This week, just as I turned ten weeks, we learned the gender of our baby. I didn’t want that to distract from the wedding, so we agreed to keep it under wraps for now. Our only focus now was our honeymoon and enjoying one another.

The plan was to return to our hotel suite tonight at the top of the beach, and tomorrow, leave for a private villa for the next week and a half.

My husband knelt and scooped me up into his arms. I released a high-pitched shriek, and our guests laughed, clapped, and whistled as I threw my arms around my husband’s neck.

Casimir carried me further down the beach, away from prying eyes. Their voices grew faint, and we were left with the sounds of the waves lapping at the beach.

“Elle, I love you now until the end of time.”

“And I will love you beyond this life and through the next one, Casimir.”

We stopped at the water’s edge, and my husband let me down. He bent his head, and with the water lapping at our feet, he slowly kissed me again.

My love for this man knew no bounds. I would risk it all for him again and again. For him, I would do it all again. My client. My friend. My lover. My husband. My forever.

The End