



In Another Time

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Category: Romance

Description: Lennox Anderson isn't searching for love. With her sharp mind and thriving career, her life is built on discipline, strategy, and control. But when she steps into The Velvet Note one night, everything she thought she knew begins to unravel.

Omair Harper commands the room without effort. A smooth-talking entrepreneur with a jazzman's spirit, he owns The Velvet Note and moves through life with the same easy rhythm as the music playing through his lounge. From the moment their eyes meet, something undeniable sparks—something that neither of them is ready for.

What begins as a magnetic connection quickly spirals into something deeper, more complicated, and not at all convenient. When time, choices, and distance fracture their bond, the question isn't just whether they'll find their way back to each other—

. . . it's whether they'll recognize themselves when they do.

In Another Time is a soul-stirring exploration of love lost, love deferred, and love that just might be written in the stars. A story of timing, growth, and the kind of connection that refuses to fade, no matter how much time—or pain—tries to erase it.

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The room was a blur of chaos, fluorescent lights flickering overhead as the doctor and nurses moved with practiced urgency around me.

I gripped the sides of the hospital bed, my knuckles turning white as another contraction ripped through me.

It felt like my body was splitting apart, but even through the pain, I couldn't help but think of him—of how his face would light up when he saw our babies for the first time.

“Breathe, baby, breathe!” His voice cut through the haze, deep, raspy and steady like it always was. He was right there, his big hand wrapped around mine, grounding me as the storm raged inside my body.

I turned my head to look at him, and for a moment, the pain faded. There he was, the man who had changed my life in every way. His sharp jaw was clenched, beads of sweat glistening on his forehead, as if he were the one pushing out two human beings.

“You're doing so good, baby,” he murmured, leaning down so his lips brushed my temple. His voice was softer than I'd ever heard it, like he was afraid of breaking me with his words. “You got this.”

I squeezed his hand harder, maybe too hard, but he didn't flinch. He just held on tighter, his other hand brushing back my damp curls with a gentleness. My rock, my person, my everything.

“I can't . . .” I choked out, tears streaming down my face as another contraction built

like a tidal wave. “I can’t do this. . .”

“Yes, you can,” he said firmly, his dark eyes locking onto mine. There was no hesitation, no doubt in his voice. “You’re the strongest woman I know. You got this. You’ve been carrying these babies for nine months, holding it down like the boss you are. Now it’s time to bring them home.”

His words hit me like a jolt of adrenaline. I nodded, though I wasn’t sure if I believed him. My body was exhausted, trembling with every push, but the way he looked at me—like I was invincible—gave me just enough strength to keep going.

The nurse leaned over me, her voice calm but commanding. “Alright, mama, one more big push. You’re almost there.”

I took a deep, shaky breath, my nails digging into his hand as I bore down with everything I had.

My scream tore through the room, raw and guttural, and then—just like that—it was over.

The sound of a baby’s cry filled the air, high-pitched and beautiful, and I collapsed back against the pillows, sobbing in relief.

“It’s a boy!” the nurse announced, lifting a squirming little bundle for us to see. My heart stopped. There he was—chocolate, tiny, perfect, and ours. They whisked him away to cut his umbilical cord, and I couldn’t hold back the tears. “My baby,” I whispered, my voice breaking. “My sweet boy.”

He was crying, his little fists waving in the air when Omir carried him over. “Hey, lil man.” His cries quieted. My heart swelled at the sight of him—this man who had it all together—completely undone by the tiny life we had created.

But there was no more time to bask in the moment. The doctor was already urging me to push again. “Baby number two is on the way,” she said, her tone encouraging but urgent.

I let out a shaky laugh, though I could barely keep my eyes open. “There’s more?” I joked weakly, and he chuckled, the sound deep and warm.

“You got this, baby,” he said again, kissing my forehead. “One more. You’re almost there.”

The second birth was quicker, though just as intense. A few minutes later, another cry filled the room, this one softer but just as beautiful. “It’s a girl!” the nurse exclaimed, and my chest tightened with a love so fierce it was almost unbearable.

Before long, they placed her in my arms, and I stared down at her in awe. She was so small, so delicate, with the tiniest fingers and a little tuft of black hair that already curled at the ends. “Hi, princess,” I whispered, my voice thick with emotion. “Mama’s here.”

Omair leaned over us, his hand resting on my shoulder as he stared at her like she was the most precious thing he’d ever seen. “She’s got your eyes,” he said softly, and I laughed through my tears.

“And he’s got your nose,” I replied, earning a grin from him.

For a moment, everything else faded away. It was just the four of us, cocooned in our little bubble of love and exhaustion. Omair reached out, cradling our son in one arm and wrapping the other around me, holding us all together.

“You did it,” he murmured, his voice low and full of wonder. “You did it.”

I looked up at him, the man who I didn't think would come back to me, and saw the tears glistening in his eyes. "We did it," I echoed, leaning into his warmth.

In that moment, with him holding our son and me cradling our daughter, I felt a peace so deep it was almost unreal—a glimpse of the happy ending I never thought was coming.

But as I looked into his eyes, full of love and pride, it reminded me of the journey to this moment hadn't been easy.

There was so much that had led us here—every choice, every risk, every fight we had to survive.

This was our ending, but the story of how we got here, . . . that was where it all began.

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LENNOX

“I cannot believe I let you talk me into this,” I said, glancing over at Sherelle as she weaved her car through the bustling downtown streets.

I smoothed the hem of my blazer—a fitted navy number that I changed into after a quick shower following a long day at work.

“I should be at home reviewing the quarterly projections for tomorrow’s meeting, not. . . whatever this is.”

“Lennox, for the love of God, relax,” Sherelle said with a laugh, tossing me a quick side-eye. “You’re thirty-four, not eighty-four. The world isn’t going to end if you miss one night of crunching numbers.”

I sighed and slouched back in my seat, though “slouching” for me meant tilting a few degrees off my usual perfect posture. “You say that now, but if I don’t have the answers ready for questions tomorrow, the world as I know it will end.”

Sherelle rolled her eyes. “Girl, you’re a VP. You’ve been at Crow & Carrington for, what, ten years? You could do that presentation in your sleep.”

“That’s exactly why I have to stay sharp,” I countered. “Because I’ve worked my ass off to get here. You know I’m the youngest VP in the firm’s history? Do you know how many late nights and sacrificed weekends it took to?”

“Yes, yes, I know. Believe me, I’ve heard it all before,” Sherelle said, cutting me off

with a wave of her hand. “You’ve done nothing but talk about work for years. Tonight is about unwinding, having fun, and maybe even meeting someone who’ll make you forget about spreadsheets for five minutes.”

I snorted. “Meeting someone? Please. The last thing I need is another man trying to ‘fix’ me because I’m too ambitious or ‘soften’ me because I’m too independent. No, thank you.”

Sherelle just laughed as she pulled into a parking space outside a small building with the words *The Velvet Note* glowing in soft golden letters above the entrance. The hum of jazz music spilled out as soon as she opened her car door.

“Trust me, you’ll thank me later,” she said, grabbing my hand and pulling me toward the entrance.

The lounge was warm and inviting, with low lighting that cast everything in a soft amber glow.

The scent of aged bourbon and something faintly sweet lingered in the air.

Tables were scattered throughout the room, each one illuminated by a single flickering candle.

On one side of the space, a small stage was set up, complete with a vintage microphone and a stool.

“This is cute,” I admitted reluctantly as Sherelle led us to a table near the back.

“See? Told you,” she said, flashing a triumphant grin.

A waitress appeared to take our drink orders—red wine for me, something fruity for

Sherelle—and I settled into my chair, feeling slightly more at ease but still itching to check my email.

“Just breathe, Lenny,” Sherelle said, as if reading my mind. “The world won’t fall apart while you’re here.”

I nodded but said nothing, my eyes wandering to the stage where a tall, muscular chocolate man adjusted the mic stand.

He wore a crisp white button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up, exposing forearms that were dusted with tattoos.

His hair was cropped close, and he had a neatly trimmed beard that framed a strikingly handsome face. Well damn. . .

“Good evening, everyone,” he said, his deep voice commanding the room’s attention. “Welcome to The Velvet Note’s first open mic night. I’m Omir, the owner and also your host for the night. And, uh, I’m thrilled to have y’all here.”

The room erupted in applause, and I found myself lightly clapping along, though I couldn’t take my eyes off him. There was something about his presence—calm, confident, and just a little bit magnetic—that made it impossible to look away.

“This is an open mic night, so if you’ve got a poem, a story, or even just a few words you want to share, don’t be shy,” he continued.

“The stage is yours.” He smiled then, and I swear it was like the whole room shifted slightly, leaning into him.

“Now, I’ll kick things off with a little something of my own,” Omir said, taking the mic in one hand and leaning casually against the stool.

And then he began to speak. His voice was a melody all its own—smooth and rich, like the jazz music playing softly in the background. The words spilled from him like a stream of consciousness, raw and unfiltered.

“I don’t need much to survive,

Just the basics ? —

Food, water, shelter. . .

But without you,

I’m suffocating.

You’re the air I pull into my lungs,

The invisible essence that keeps me alive.

I can’t see you,

But I feel you,

Pressing against my chest,

Whispering life into my weary bones.

You don’t realize, do you?

How your love fills me.

How it moves through me,

Like oxygen to blood.

Without you,

I'm breathless,

Choking on the emptiness of what could have been.

There's a stillness when you're not here,

Like the world forgot to breathe.

I gasp for you in my solitude,

Reaching, clawing,

Like a drowning man fighting for just one more inhale.

You're my atmosphere,

The steady rhythm of in and out,

Keeping me afloat in a sea of chaos.

And when you're near,

It's not just survival.

It's life.

Deep, rich, intoxicating.

Your laughter is the wind in my sails,

Your voice the breeze on my face.

And your love?

It's the storm,

Fierce and untamed,

Blowing away everything that doesn't matter.

But I know,

Even air can't be taken for granted.

One moment you're here,

The next, I'm gasping,

Grasping at a memory of what kept me alive.

So I'll hold on to you like my last breath,

Knowing that without you,

I'd fade.

Because you're not just air.

You're my air.

And no man can survive without that.”

I sat there, completely transfixed. I didn’t notice the wine glass in front of me or the growing applause around me when he finished. All I could feel was the way his words lingered in the air, like a tangible presence that wrapped around me and refused to let go.

“Earth to Lennox,” Sherelle said, snapping her fingers in front of my face.

“What?” I blinked, suddenly aware of my surroundings again.

“You were staring,” she said, grinning mischievously.

“I was not,” I said, sitting up straighter.

“Oh, you so were. Don’t even try to deny it.”

Before I could respond, Omir stepped down from the stage and began mingling with the crowd, moving from table to table with an easy charm. When he reached ours, I felt my pulse quicken.

“Good evening, ladies,” he said, flashing a warm smile. All thirty-two pearly white and straight. A set of full lips blessed by the Lord himself.

“Hey, Omir,” Sherelle said casually. Of course, she already knew him. “This is my workaholic friend, Lennox. I had to drag her out tonight.”

“Nice to meet you, Lennox,” Omir said, his eyes locking onto mine.

“Likewise,” I managed to say, though my voice sounded quieter than usual.

“Smart friend,” he said, glancing at Sherelle. “We all need a break sometimes.” Omir smiled, a slow, knowing smile that sent a shiver down my spine. “Enjoy the night.”

As Omir moved on to the next table, Sherelle turned to me with a wide grin plastered across her face. “Girl, tell me you didn’t feel that.”

“Feel what?” I said, feigning ignorance as I reached for my glass of wine.

“Don’t play with me, Lenny. The way he looked at you?”

I rolled my eyes but couldn’t suppress the small smile tugging at the corner of my lips. “Okay, he’s handsome. He’s fine. I’ll give you that. But I don’t see what the big deal is. How do you even know him?”

Sherelle leaned back in her chair, swirling her drink lazily.

“Omir and I go way back. We grew up in the same neighborhood. He used to hustle until he turned his life around, but he was always into jazz music. I used to think it was weird, but whatever. When I heard he was opening this place, I knew it would be special.”

“Sounds like he’s got a lot going for himself,” I said, trying to sound disinterested, but my eyes betrayed me. They flickered toward Omir as he worked the room, moving with an effortless confidence that seemed to pull everyone in his orbit.

He laughed at something a woman at the next table said, the deep timbre of his voice cutting through the soft jazz. His smile was infectious, his energy magnetic. I hated to admit it, but there was something about him that was. . . intriguing.

Sherelle didn’t miss a thing. “You’re staring again,” she teased.

“I am not staring,” I said, snapping my gaze back to her.

“Oh, please. I see you sneaking looks. And trust me, he notices too. Do you see the way he keeps glancing back at you?”

I scoffed. “You’re imagining things.”

“Am I?” Sherelle said, her grin widening. “Because he just looked over here again.”

I turned my head ever so slightly, pretending to adjust my bracelet, and sure enough, Omir’s eyes were on me.

My stomach did a little flip as our gazes locked.

His expression was calm but curious, like he was trying to figure me out.

Then he did something I wasn’t expecting—he lifted his hand, subtly motioning toward the bar with a tilt of his head.

“Oh my God,” Sherelle whispered, clutching my arm. “He wants you to go over there!”

I froze, my heart suddenly racing. “Are you sure he’s not just looking in this direction?”

“Lennox, stop overthinking and go. You don’t need a spreadsheet to figure this one out.”

I hesitated, glancing at my wine glass like it might somehow provide an excuse to stay seated. But deep down, I knew Sherelle was right. There was no logical reason for me to go, but something about the way he looked at me made it impossible to

resist.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” I muttered under my breath, pushing back my chair.

“That’s my girl,” Sherelle said, giving me a playful shove.

As I made my way toward the bar, I became acutely aware of every step, every sound, every flutter of my pulse.

My thoughts raced. Why is he interested in me?

Did Sherelle set this up? What am I even going to say?

But then I remembered the way he’d looked at me—steady, deliberate, and just a little mischievous—and I felt a flicker of courage.

The bar was a little quieter than the rest of the lounge, tucked into a corner where the lighting was even dimmer. Omir was leaning against the counter, nursing a glass of something amber. He straightened as I approached, his smile easy and welcoming.

“Hey,” he said, his voice low enough that it felt like a secret between us.

“Hi,” I replied, suddenly feeling out of place in my business attire.

“You looked like you needed a reason to step away from the table,” he said, nodding toward Sherelle, who was pretending not to watch us while failing miserably.

I chuckled. “She just loves to play match maker, doesn’t she?”

“Relle is cool. We go way back to high school,” Omir said, his gaze warm and steady. “But I figured you might appreciate a quieter conversation.”

I tilted my head, studying him. “And what makes you think I want to talk to you?”

His smile widened, and there was a playful glint in his eyes. “Call it a hunch. Or maybe I’m just hoping I’m right.”

I couldn’t help but smile back, though I tried to suppress it. “You’re awfully confident.”

“Not confident,” he said, leaning slightly closer. “Just curious.” The way he said it made my skin tingle, like he wasn’t just talking about this moment but something deeper.

“Well, Omir,” I said, my voice firmer now, “curiosity can be dangerous.”

“Only if you’re afraid of what you might find,” he replied, his tone soft but challenging.

I opened my mouth to respond but found myself momentarily speechless. There was something disarming about him, something that made me feel both on edge and completely at ease.

“So,” he said, breaking the silence, “what does someone like you do for fun, Lennox?”

The question caught me off guard. “Someone like me?”

He gestured subtly to my blazer and the sharp, no-nonsense look I hadn’t bothered to shed. “Yeah. You’ve got this air about you—focused, driven, independent, and probably a little too hard on yourself. But I bet there’s more to you than that.”

I arched an eyebrow, unsure whether to be offended or impressed. “And you think

you've got me all figured out, huh?"

"Not yet," he said, his voice dropping just slightly. "But I'd like to." Before I could respond, the bartender set a fresh glass of wine in front of me, and Omir gave him a nod of thanks. "On me," he said.

I glanced down at the glass, then back up at him. "Thank you."

For the first time in a long time, I felt like the control I always prided myself on was slipping, and I wasn't sure if I wanted to grab it back or let it go entirely.

As I took a sip of the wine, I felt the weight of his gaze, steady and unrelenting, and I knew—whatever this was, it wasn't going to be simple.

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OMIR

The second she walked in, I noticed her.

It wasn't just that she was beautiful—though God knows, she was.

It was the way she carried herself, like she owned every inch of the room without even trying.

She had this confidence about her, the kind that didn't need loud outfits or flashy jewelry to announce itself.

Her blazer, black dress, and heels spoke volumes all on their own: sharp, sophisticated, and tolerated absolutely no bullshit.

She had that “dragged here against my will” energy written all over her face, but that didn't make her any less stunning. If anything, the faint crease of irritation on her brow only made me more curious.

I'd been working hard to get The Velvet Note up and running for almost a year, and hosting an open mic night was a goal of mine. Nights like this were what I lived for—the hum of jazz in the background, the soft murmur of conversation, and the glow of candles flickering against dark wood tables.

This place was my heart and soul, born out of years of dreaming, hustling and saving. I'd spent my twenties hugging the block and chasing women who never stuck around.

By the time I hit thirty something, I was tired of it all—the grind, the fleeting connections, the feeling that I wasn’t building anything real.

So, I decided to go all in. I took everything I had, every penny I’d saved, and poured it into this club, a space where people could come to feel something—joy, sorrow, hope, love, whatever they needed.

But tonight, as I watched Lennox from across the room, I realized I’d never felt this particular kind of energy before. It was like I could feel her presence, even when she wasn’t looking my way.

I waited until the timing felt right—until our eyes met across the room—and then I motioned for her to meet me at the bar.

She hesitated, of course. I could see the wheels turning in her mind, calculating all the reasons she shouldn’t come over.

But then she stood, smoothing her blazer, and started walking my way.

Every step she took felt deliberate, like she was trying to decide if she was making a mistake. By the time she reached the bar and our conversation began, I already knew I liked her.

“So, did Sherelle really have to drag you out tonight?”

“Yep,” she said simply, nodding toward Sherelle. “She’s been trying to get me to ‘loosen up’ since forever.”

“She’s got good instincts,” I said, smiling. “This seems like the perfect place to loosen up.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” she said, her tone light but with an undercurrent I couldn’t quite place.

“And why is that?”

“Because this isn’t really my scene,” she admitted. “Don’t get me wrong—it’s beautiful here. Congrats on everything. But I’m not exactly the sit-and-sip-wine-while-listening-to-jazz type.”

I raised an eyebrow. “And what type are you?” She opened her mouth to answer, then closed it again, like she wasn’t sure how to respond. “Let me guess,” I said, leaning in slightly. “The type who spends so much time working that you’ve forgotten how to have fun. How to live.”

She gave me a sharp look, but there was a hint of a smile tugging at her lips. “And what makes you such an expert?”

“I’ve been there,” I said simply. “I used to be all about the hustle, trying to prove something to everyone around me. It’s exhausting.”

“And now?” she asked, her voice softer now.

“Now, I do this,” I said, gesturing around the room. “I’ve worked hard to create a space where people can come to feel something real. To connect. To vibe. That’s what matters to me now.”

She studied me for a long moment, like she was trying to decide whether to believe me. “You’re different,” she said finally.

“Is that a good thing?” I asked.

Her smile was faint, but it was there. “I haven’t decided yet.”

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LENNOX

I couldn't get him out of my head.

Omir. His name alone felt like it was meant to be whispered or sung. His voice, that low, melodic tone, lingered in my mind long after our conversation ended. And then there was the way he looked at me—steady, deliberate, as though he already knew me and was simply waiting for me to catch up.

But it wasn't just his words or his presence that had me so tangled up.

It was the fire beneath it all, the quiet intensity that crackled between us.

I hadn't felt anything like it in years, maybe ever.

And though I told myself it was nothing more than harmless flirtation, the truth was far less innocent.

I couldn't stop thinking about his lips.

The way they moved when he spoke, how they curved into that knowing smile, as if he had already seen the end of this story and was perfectly fine waiting for me to figure it out.

I wondered, briefly, what it would feel like to close the space between us, to press my lips to his and let the world around us dissolve.

“Girl, you zoning out over there again?”

Sherelle’s voice snapped me back to reality, and I blinked, trying to shake the warmth spreading through me.

“What?” I asked, playing dumb as I turned to face her.

Sherelle gave me a sly grin. “I asked if you’re ready to head out. You’ve been sitting there staring into space for the last fifteen minutes. Either you’re thinking about Omir, or you’re thinking about work. And since you’re still here, I’m guessing it’s not work.”

I sighed, trying to keep my expression neutral. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Uh-huh,” Sherelle said, crossing her arms. “Well, I’m tired, and I have to be up early to hit the gym for my client. You coming, or are you staying?”

Before I could answer, my gaze drifted across the room again.

Omir was behind the bar now, talking to one of his staff, but I felt it the moment his eyes found mine.

The rest of the room seemed to fade away as we locked eyes, and for a moment, neither of us moved. It was as if he was daring me to stay.

“I think I’ll stick around for a bit,” I said, breaking the silence.

Sherelle’s eyes widened, and then she let out a low whistle. “Well, well. Look at you. Little Miss All-Business finally letting loose. I’m proud of you.”

“Don’t make it weird,” I muttered, though I couldn’t help but smile.

“I won’t,” she said, grabbing her purse. “But you better tell me everything tomorrow.”

“There’s nothing to tell,” I said quickly.

“Yet,” Sherelle shot back with a wink. “Good night, babe. Don’t do anything I probably would.”

I rolled my eyes as she walked away, but the moment I was alone, my pulse quickened.

The club was quieter now, the crowd thinning as the night wore on.

I glanced toward the bar again, but Omir was gone.

For a moment, I considered leaving. This wasn’t me—I didn’t hang around clubs waiting for.

. . what, exactly? A man I barely knew to sweep me off my feet? It was ridiculous.

And yet, I stayed.

There was one last spoken word performance, and soon, the hum of conversation faded as people began to trickle out. I found myself nursing the last of my wine, unsure of what I was even waiting for. Then, I felt him before I saw him.

“You stayed.” His voice was soft but warm, and I turned to find Omir standing beside me, his hands tucked casually into his pockets.

“I guess I did,” I said, keeping my tone light, even though my heart was pounding.

He smiled, that same slow, knowing smile that made my knees feel just a little unsteady. “Something told me you would.”

I raised an eyebrow, trying to play it cool. “Oh? And what exactly told you that?”

He tilted his head slightly, studying me. “Call it intuition. You strike me as someone who listens to that little voice inside, even when you try to ignore it.”

The accuracy of his statement caught me off guard, and I let out a small, nervous laugh. “Again, you’re awfully confident for someone who just met me.”

“Again, not confident,” he said, stepping a little closer.

“Just observant.” His words hung in the air between us, and for a moment, I didn’t know what to say.

The room felt smaller somehow, quieter, like it was just the two of us and nothing else mattered.

“Lennox,” he said softly, and the sound of my name on his lips sent a shiver down my spine.

“Hmm?” I managed, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Stop overthinking.”

Before I could respond, his hand brushed lightly against mine, and then his lips were on mine, soft and warm and impossibly perfect. His hands rested lightly on my waist, pulling me closer, anchoring me to a moment I couldn’t pull away from even if I

wanted to.

“Lennox.”

I blinked, startled, and found Omir standing in front of me, his expression equal parts amused and curious. “Hmm?” I managed, trying to shake the fog of my daydream.

“Where’d you just go?” he asked, leaning a little closer. His voice was low and teasing, and I felt the heat rush to my face.

“Nowhere,” I said quickly, though the way he raised an eyebrow told me he wasn’t buying it.

“Hmm,” he said, his lips twitching into a knowing smile. He paused, and the weight of his gaze sent a shiver down my spine. “Would you like to continue the night with me?”

I froze, my heart stuttering as I tried to process his words. Was he serious? Was I imagining this too? “Continue the night?” I repeated, my voice more tentative than I intended.

“Yeah,” he said simply, leaning one elbow on the edge of the bar. “No pressure though.”

He was so calm, so easy in the way he asked, like it didn’t matter to him whether I said yes or no. But the look in his eyes told me otherwise.

I glanced toward the door, where Sherelle had disappeared not long ago, and then back at Omir. Everything about him felt. . . safe but thrilling at the same time. Like stepping off a ledge, knowing there’d be something solid to land on.

“I . . . don’t usually do this,” I admitted, fidgeting with the stem of my wine glass.

“Neither do I,” he said, his smile softening. “But I think we’ve already figured out tonight isn’t a usual night.”

I bit my lip, weighing the options. Go home, crawl into bed, and return to my perfectly ordered life, or. . . step into the unknown with a man who had me thinking about kisses I hadn’t even had yet.

The club grew quieter with every passing minute as the last few patrons trickled out.

I sat at the bar, nursing the last sip of my wine and trying not to overthink what I’d just agreed to.

Omír moved easily around the space, thanking customers, chatting briefly with his staff as they began to clean up for the night.

He seemed so in his element, as if every inch of this place was an extension of him—comfortable, warm, undeniably magnetic.

I pretended to be absorbed in the soft hum of the music still playing through the speakers, but every time I glanced his way, my pulse quickened. He caught my eye once or twice, flashing that easy, knowing smile of his, and it felt like a promise: Just wait.

Finally, the lights dimmed further, signaling the end of the night. The staff had finished cleaning up, and it was just the two of us left. Omír grabbed his coat and walked toward me, his movements unhurried but purposeful.

“Ready?” he asked, his voice low and smooth, as if we weren’t the last two people in the building.

“Yeah,” I said softly, sliding off the barstool.

He led me to the door, holding it open as I stepped out into the cool night air. There was a black Lambo parked outside that I didn’t notice before, and I just knew it belonged to him. It practically gleamed under the streetlights. I hesitated for a second, taking in the effortless elegance of it.

“Don’t let it intimidate you,” he teased, unlocking the car with a quick press of his key fob.

I laughed lightly, shaking my head. “I’m not intimidated.”

“Good,” he said, opening the passenger door for me. The way he said it sent a shiver down my spine, and I slid into the plush leather seat, letting the scent of polished wood and faint cologne wrap around me.

Omair settled in behind the wheel, and soon, we were gliding through the quiet streets. The city at night was a different kind of beautiful—calmer, more intimate. Streetlights cast soft halos onto the pavement, and the faint buzz of neon signs flickered in the distance.

“You didn’t tell me where we’re going,” I said, breaking the comfortable silence.

He glanced at me, his profile illuminated by the glow of the dashboard. “My place,” he said simply. “Unless you’ve changed your mind.”

I shook my head, surprising even myself with how certain I felt. “I haven’t.”

“Good,” he said again, his lips curving into a small smile.

As we drove, the conversation flowed easily, each exchange peeling back a layer of

him I hadn't expected to see.

He talked about his love for jazz and how opening the club had been a dream for years in the making.

I found myself admitting things I wouldn't normally share with someone I'd just met—how work consumed so much of my life, how I often felt like I was running out of time to figure out what really mattered.

By the time we pulled into the driveway of a modern townhouse tucked into a quiet corner of the city, I felt like I'd known him for longer than just a couple of hours.

Omair parked the car and came around to open my door, extending a hand to help me out. The gesture was small but thoughtful, and it warmed me in a way I wasn't prepared for. "Come on," he said, guiding me toward the front door.

Inside, his home was just as effortlessly stylish as he was—clean, organized, earth tones, and subtle hints of personality in the form of framed album covers and scattered books of poetry.

"Welcome," he said, slipping off his jacket and draping it over a chair.

I sank into the soft cushions, feeling a rare sense of ease wash over me. But before I could fully relax, Omair crouched down in front of me, his hands lightly resting on my ankles.

"What are you doing?" I asked, my voice catching slightly.

"Taking care of you," he said, his tone steady as his fingers deftly unbuckled the straps of my heels and set them aside.

The intimacy of the gesture caught me off guard, and when he looked up at me, his dark eyes locking with mine, I felt like I couldn't breathe. His touch was gentle but deliberate, his thumb brushing against my skin as if testing the boundaries of this moment.

I didn't respond, couldn't, as he lifted my foot and pressed his lips to my ankle. The sensation sent a jolt of warmth through me, and I fought the urge to pull away—not because I wanted him to stop, but because I was suddenly hyper aware of how vulnerable I felt.

His lips moved with reverence, trailing soft kisses up my calf to my thigh.

And then, to my utter disbelief, his tongue darted out, warm and deliberate, in circles on my skin.

A sharp inhale escaped me, and he paused, his eyes flicking up to meet mine again.

The intensity in his gaze was overwhelming, and I knew he could see everything I was feeling—every ounce of hesitation, every flicker of desire I couldn't suppress.

“You don't have to be nervous,” he said softly, his voice grounding me even as it sent shivers down my spine.

“I'm not,” I whispered, though the quiver in my voice betrayed me.

Omair smiled, a slow, knowing smile that told me he wasn't fooled.

“Good.” He paused, lifting his head slightly, and his dark eyes met mine with an intensity that made my breath hitch.

Slowly, he let my foot rest gently on the floor, his hands still holding me in place.

“Lennox,” he said, his voice low, almost reverent.

I opened my mouth to answer, but nothing came out at first. I could only nod, my body betraying me before my brain could catch up. “Can I kiss something else?”

Finally, I found my voice, though it was barely above a whisper. “Yes,” I said, the single word laced with more longing than I intended.

Omir’s lips curved into a devilish smirk as he rose from the floor. I felt a rush of warmth between my thighs as I anticipated what was to come.

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OMIR

I 'd been holding back for as long as I could.

But looking into her eyes—those deep, brown eyes that always saw more than I was ready to show—yeah, it was a wrap.

The need I felt for Lennox wasn't just desire.

. . It was deeper than that. It was a burn.

A pull. A craving I couldn't fight off anymore.

Her lips were slightly parted, like she was mid-thought but lost in the moment, and I couldn't help myself—I leaned in, slow and steady, pressing my mouth to hers like I had all the time in the world but no patience left in my body.

She melted into me, soft and sweet, but there was a fire behind the way her tongue danced with mine. That shit lit something in me.

“C'mere,” I murmured against her lips, arms locking around her tight little frame.

She didn't even hesitate when I lifted her off the couch.

She fit into me like we were made to be in sync—her curves molding to my chest, her legs wrapping around my waist like second nature.

With each step toward my bedroom, her warmth seeped through my clothes and into my skin.

The smell of her perfume—light, floral, expensive—wrapped around my senses and pushed me right to the edge.

By the time we hit the top of the stairs, I kicked the door open with my foot, still kissing her like my life depended on it, and carried her over to the bed like she was the only thing I wanted in this damn world. I laid her down gently, but my need wasn't gentle. Not tonight.

“Damn, look at you,” I breathed out, letting my eyes drink her in. Her breath was shaky, her lips swollen from our kisses, and her skin had this flushed glow that made my dick throb in my jeans. “You don't even know how bad I want you.”

She moaned low when I lowered myself between her legs, her fingers slipping into my waves like she couldn't get enough of me. I nipped at her neck, slow and deliberate, lips dragging along her pulse. I wanted her to feel every second of it. Every ounce of intention.

Her body arched when I slid my hands beneath her shirt and pushed it up, exposing her brown skin and perky breasts. I licked my lips then lowered my mouth, dragging my tongue around her nipple before sucking it deep and slow.

“Omir. . .” She whimpered, breath hitching.

“You like that?” I murmured, glancing up at her through low lids. I switched to the other nipple, letting my tongue flick and tease until her fingers gripped my head, keeping me there. Her body was already trembling. That was my cue.

I kissed my way down her stomach, slow as hell, letting her anticipation build until I

felt her hips start to rise up off the bed.

I could tell she was close to begging, but I wasn't handing over pleasure that easy.

I was gonna earn that orgasm. Make her remember my name every time she closed her eyes.

When I slid her panties off, I paused. "Fuck. . ." I muttered under my breath. She was glistening. Perfect. Already dripping. I kissed her inner thighs first, let my tongue trace fire along her skin while she squirmed beneath me. "Open up for me, Lennox," I growled softly, spreading her legs wider.

And when I finally gave her what she wanted, I did it slowly. Long, wet licks up and down her slit, careful to avoid her clit, just to hear her moan in frustration. Her hands twisted the sheets, her hips rolling.

"Omir." She gasped. "Right there—don't tease me."

I chuckled, lips pressed against her soaked pussy.

Then I locked in. I flicked her clit with precision, circled it, sucked it deep, using my lips and tongue like I knew exactly what rhythm made her lose her mind.

The sounds she made? Music to my ears. I stayed buried in her, tongue fucking her pussy while my hands kept her thighs wide open.

"Omir! Oh my—fuck!" she cried out, voice breaking as her orgasm ripped through her.

I held her through it, licking and sucking her until her body convulsed and her thighs tried to clamp around my head. When I finally pulled away, her chest was heaving,

face flushed, eyes barely open. That was the look I wanted—blissfully wrecked.

But I wasn't done. I climbed back up her body, kissing her as I went. She grabbed at my waistband, her hands shaky but determined.

I smirked, pulling off my shirt and dropping my pants in one fluid motion. Her eyes widened as she took me in, licking her lips like I was dessert. "Lift them legs up," I said, voice low, lips brushing her ear. She moaned at just the sound of that.

I lined myself up and slid in deep. One smooth, thick stroke that had her gasping and clutching my arms. I stayed there, buried to the hilt, giving her time to adjust—but also just savoring the way she hugged me.

"Damn, Lennox, you feel like heaven," I groaned.

When I pulled back and pushed in again, her moan was filthy.

I picked up the pace, finding a rhythm that had the bed rocking, the headboard knocking, and both of us sweating.

Her legs wrapped around my waist again, pulling me deeper.

"Take it, Lennox," I gritted out. "Take all this dick, beautiful."

"Yes—yes, Omir—harder, don't stop!"

She was loud now, clawing at my back, body arching every time I slammed into her.

I grabbed her thighs and pressed them to her chest, changing the angle and watching her lose it all over again.

She cried out as her body seized up, cumming again around me, her pussy pulsing and wet as hell. That did it.

My own orgasm built fast, fire licking up my spine. “Shit. . . I’m bout to—fuck, Lennox,” I groaned, pulling out and stroking myself as I came in hot spurts across her stomach and thighs.

Breathing heavy, I collapsed beside her, pulling her close as she giggled breathlessly against my chest. “That was. . .” she whispered, voice raw.

“I know,” I said, kissing her forehead.

After I cleaned us up and swapped out the sheets, we slid back into bed like we were made to fit that way—tangled up, skin to skin, hearts still beating heavy from everything we’d just shared.

Lennox lay draped across my chest, her breath steady, her hair spilling over me in soft waves that smelled like heaven and sex.

And I couldn’t stop looking at her. Couldn’t stop feeling her, even in the quiet.

She was beautiful, yeah—brown skin kissed by the faint light sneaking in through the window, lips slightly parted, that little crease in her brow even in rest—but it wasn’t just that. It was something underneath. Something solid. Something soulful. She looked like peace. Like a prayer answered.

My fingers trailed along the curve of her shoulder, slow and gentle, and that was when it hit me.

Like dead in the chest. I didn’t just want Lennox; I loved her.

Already. And yeah, it sounded crazy as hell.

We hadn't even scratched the surface of everything we could be.

But none of that mattered. She felt inevitable,.

. . like she was always supposed to land in my life exactly when she did. In my bed.
In my arms. In my heart.

And I knew right then—there was no backing out. Not from this. Not from her.

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LENNOX

I stirred awake to the sensation of soft lips brushing along the curve of my shoulder, trailing a line of warmth that pulled me out of sleep.

My eyes fluttered open, and the first thing I saw was Omir.

His head was bent, his mouth leaving gentle kisses on my bare skin, as though he couldn't resist the urge to touch me even while I slept.

The room was bathed in soft morning light, and for a moment, I allowed myself to sink into the tenderness of it.

"Good morning, beautiful," he murmured, his voice low and full of sleep.

"Morning," I replied, my voice hoarse from the night before.

He pulled back slightly, his gaze sweeping over my face as a smile spread across his lips. "You're even more fine in the daylight."

I laughed softly, shaking my head. "I'm sure I look a hot mess, so I doubt that."

"I don't," he said firmly, brushing a strand of hair away from my face. "Stay right here. I got something for you."

Before I could respond, he slipped out of bed and disappeared. I sat up slowly, pulling the sheet around me as the reality of the night before began to settle in. My

body still hummed with the memory of his touch, but my mind was already racing ahead.

Moments later, Omir returned with a tray balanced in his hands, and the scent of coffee and fresh fruit filled the air.

He set it down on the bed beside me, revealing a spread that looked straight out of a magazine—fluffy omelets topped with charred peppers, toast, berries, and a steaming mug of coffee.

“You made this?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Fun fact. I like to cook,” he said, settling beside me on the bed. “And I figured you could use a little fuel after last night.”

The way he said it made my cheeks flush, and I quickly reached for the coffee to distract myself. “Thank you,” I said, taking a sip.

We ate in companionable silence at first, but it wasn’t long before he broke it. “About last night,” he began, his tone easy but curious. “Can I see you again?”

I froze for a moment, my fork hovering over my half-eaten omelet.

I had felt something deep last night, something I didn’t want to put into words.

Being with Omir was unlike anything I’d experienced before.

It wasn’t just the physical connection; it was the way he peeled back layers I didn’t even know were there.

But that was exactly why I needed to push it aside.

“Last night was fun,” I said, forcing a smile as I focused on my plate. “But that’s all it was.”

Omair didn’t respond right away, and when I glanced at him, I could see the flicker of surprise in his eyes. “Just fun?” he asked, his voice measured.

“Yes,” I said firmly, setting down my fork. “I have a lot going on right now—my career, my goals. Right now, I’m vice president of the company I work for. The goal is to be the president. The first black woman president. I don’t have time for anything more.”

His jaw tightened for a moment, but then he nodded, leaning back against the headboard. “I get it,” he said, though there was something in his tone that made me wonder if he really did.

“I should get going. What’s your address?” I asked, setting the tray aside and swinging my legs over the edge of the bed to request my Uber.

He told me, watched me as I slipped back into the clothes I’d worn the night before, the fabric feeling heavier now than it had then. I could feel his eyes on me, but I didn’t dare meet them.

“Lennox,” he said softly as I adjusted my blazer. I turned to face him, trying to keep my expression neutral. “Last night was more than just fun,” he said, his voice steady. “Shit, at least for me it was.”

My chest tightened, but I forced myself to hold his gaze. “It can’t be more than that,” I said quietly. “I’m not in a place where I can. . . I can’t give you what you need.”

He nodded again, this time with a small, almost resigned smile. I hesitated for a moment, guilt gnawing at the edges of my resolve. But then he stood and crossed the

room, his movements unhurried. “Let me walk you out,” he said, his tone polite but distant.

I followed him, the air between us thick with unspoken words. When we reached the door, he turned to me, his expression unreadable. Before I could fully step past him, he reached out, his hand lightly brushing my arm.

“Lennox,” he said, his voice lower now, almost a whisper.

I turned back, and in an instant, his lips were on mine.

The kiss was intense, raw, and full of all the things we hadn’t said.

It stole the air from my lungs, leaving me reeling and questioning everything I thought I’d decided.

When he pulled back, his gaze locked with mine, daring me to say something.

“Take care of yourself,” he said simply, his voice steady but tinged with something I couldn’t quite place.

I nodded, swallowing hard before stepping out the door. As I slid into the backseat of the Uber, I couldn’t stop thinking about the way Omir kissed me. It was like he was trying to leave a mark, to make sure I didn’t forget him as easily as I wanted to.

I leaned my head back against the seat, closing my eyes for a moment before pulling my phone out of my purse. If there was anyone who could help me make sense of the swirl of emotions in my chest, it was Sherelle.

She picked up on the second ring. “Girl, I know you didn’t call me before my alarm went off.”

“Relle,” I said, ignoring her groggy tone, “you were right.”

There was a pause, followed by the sound of rustling sheets. “Hold up. Let me sit up. What was I right about this time?”

“Omir,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Oh, this is gonna be good,” she said, and I could hear the grin in her voice. “Start from the beginning.”

I sighed, glancing out the window as the city blurred past. “We spent the night together.”

A loud, dramatic gasp filled my ear. “Lennox! You did not just casually drop that on me like it’s nothing!”

“I mean, technically, I just did,” I said, smirking despite myself.

“Don’t try to deflect. Spill the tea, girl. Was the dick everything you imagined? Because I know you were imagining it last night.”

“Sherelle!” I hissed, glancing at the driver to make sure he wasn’t paying attention.

“What? You’re the one who stayed at the man’s place. Don’t act all shy now,” she teased. “So? Details.”

I bit my lip, trying to figure out how much to tell her. “It was. . . deliriously amazing,” I admitted. “Like the best. Nothing better. But that’s not the point.”

“Oh, there’s a point now?” she asked, her tone dripping with amusement.

“I’m serious, Sherelle. He’s... different. He’s thoughtful and charming and?—”

“And fine as hell.” She interjected.

“Yes, that too,” I said, rolling my eyes. “But I can’t do this. I told him it was a one-time thing.”

“What?” she demanded, her tone shifting from playful to serious. “Why are you so quick to shut it down?”

“Because I have a plan,” I said, frustration creeping into my voice. “A career. Goals. I can’t let some... ridiculously attractive jazz club owner throw me off course.”

“Lennox,” she said, her voice softer now, “sometimes the best things in life happen when you’re not planning for them. Maybe Omir is one of those things.”

“I don’t have time for distractions,” I argued. “And what if this is just a game to him? I know you mentioned me before last night. I know you. So, what if this was him just ‘getting me’ and there’s others lined up?”

“And yet, he spent the night with you ,” she pointed out. “Doesn’t that tell you something?”

I sighed, rubbing my temple as the driver made a turn. “It doesn’t matter. I told him it was just fun, and he agreed. That’s that.”

Sherelle let out a long sigh. “You’re gonna die alone, you know that?”

“Fuck off.”

“Lenny, don’t come crying to me when you realize you let a good thing slip through

your number crunching fingers.”

“I’m not going to cry,” I said firmly. “I’m going to focus on my work, like I always do.”

“Right,” she said, clearly unconvinced. “Well, for what it’s worth, I think you’re making a mistake. But I love you anyway.”

“Love you too,” I said, smiling despite myself. “Thanks for listening to my Ted Talk.”

“Anytime.” She snickered. “Now go home and get some rest. You know you need it.”

I chuckled and hung up, leaning back against the seat again as I let her words sink in. The city morning sun flickered against the window, but all I could think about was Omir and the way it made me feel—alive, unguarded, and completely unprepared.

Maybe Sherelle was right. Maybe I was running from something that deserved a chance. But for now, all I wanted to do was get home, shower, shut the world out, and pretend my heart wasn’t already questioning the choice I’d made.

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OMIR

Two weeks. Fourteen days since Lennox walked out of my front door and I still couldn't get her out of my fucking head.

She wasn't the first woman I'd spent an unforgettable night with, but she was the first in a while.

Something about her made it different. It wasn't just the way her good pussy molded to the curve of my dick.

It was her presence—her fire, her independence, and that guarded vulnerability she tried so hard to hide.

I thought about calling Sherelle, more times than I cared to admit, just to see what was up with Lennox. But every time, I stopped myself. If Lennox wanted to keep her distance, I wasn't going to chase her ass. I wouldn't force something she wasn't ready for, no matter how much I wanted more.

And I did want more. Fuck, I wanted more.

I couldn't explain it, this pull I felt toward her, like the universe had aligned just to put her in my path.

She felt like my person, the one I hadn't known I'd been looking for until I found her.

But what could I do? She made it clear she wasn't interested in anything serious, and

I wasn't about to twist her arm.

So, I tried to let it be. I buried myself in work at the club, focusing on fine-tuning every detail to make sure everything ran smoothly.

But no matter how busy I kept myself, Lennox still crept into my thoughts.

Today was no different. I was getting dressed, pulling on a crisp black shirt and slacks, when my phone buzzed on the nightstand.

I grabbed it, glancing at the screen. It was an unknown number.

"This is Omir," I answered and immediately closed my eyes, shaking my head as I heard the recording. Soon, my brother's voice came through.

"Yo, big bro," O'Shea said, his voice already defensive. "I need a favor."

I sighed, already knowing where this was going. "What happened this time?"

"Cindy's ass," he said, frustration heavy in his tone. "She called the cops on me again, said I violated some bullshit restraining order. You know she's just tryna make my life hell."

"O," I said, pinching the bridge of my nose, "this is the second time in three months. What the fuck are you doing?"

"I wasn't even doing anything!" he argued. "I just went to drop off some diapers for Juice, and she started tripping." O'Shea Junior, better known as Juice, was my eight-month-old nephew. I'd given him the nickname because I refused to go around calling his ass OJ.

“You shouldn’t have gone over there in the first place,” I snapped. “You know Cindy’s looking for any excuse to drag your ass back into court.”

“What was I supposed to do? Let my son go without?”

“You could’ve dropped them off with someone else or arranged to meet in a public place. You have options, but you keep making the same damn mistakes.”

There was a brief silence on the line before he muttered, “Are you gonna come through for me, or nah?”

I sighed again, already grabbing my keys. “Which precinct are you at?”

He gave me the information, and I hung up without another word. My mood had officially been fucked up. As I drove toward the jail, I couldn’t help but think about the difference between O’Shea and me.

Seven years younger at twenty-nine, he was still chasing things that didn’t serve him—chaotic relationships, quick money, and excuses. I’d been there once, caught up in the noise of bad decisions and ego. But somewhere along the way, I realized I wanted more for myself.

I wanted stability, purpose, something to build that would last. That was why I opened the club, why I poured every ounce of myself into creating a space where people could come together and feel something real.

At almost thirty years old, O’Shea wasn’t there yet. He was still stuck in the cycle, and no matter how many times I tried to pull him out, he seemed determined to stay.

When I pulled up to the jail, I parked and walked inside, my mind still racing.

As much as I wanted to be angry with him, I couldn't turn my back on him.

He was my brother, and if I didn't have his back, who would?

After what felt like an eternity of paperwork and payments, O'Shea finally emerged, looking tired but unapologetic.

"Good looks, bro," he said as we headed toward the car.

I shook my head, climbing behind the wheel. As I pulled out of the lot, I glanced at him and could feel the tension in the car thickening. I could feel it building, the words I'd been holding back clawing their way to the surface.

"You know this shit has to stop, right?" I said, my tone sharp as I stared straight ahead.

O'Shea shifted in his seat, his expression hardening. "I told you, bro. It wasn't my fault this time."

"It's never your fault, is it?" I snapped, gripping the steering wheel tighter. "You keep finding yourself in these situations, but somehow, you're always the victim."

"You don't know what it's like dealing with Cindy's ass," he shot back, his voice rising. "Nigga, she's crazy, man. She'll do anything to make my life miserable because I don't wanna be with her no more."

"She's not the one who keeps making dumb decisions," I said, cutting him off. "You're almost thirty, O. You've got a kid to think about now. When are you gonna stop blaming everyone else and start taking some responsibility for your life?"

He scoffed, crossing his arms over his chest. "Easy for you to say, Mr. Perfect.

You've got your fancy lounge club shit and your perfect ass life. Not everyone gets to live like you."

"Don't start with that," I warned, my voice low but firm. "You think I just woke up one day and everything fell into place? I worked my ass off to get here. I sacrificed, I made changes, and I stopped letting my ego run my life."

O'Shea stared out the window, his jaw clenched. "Not everyone's like you, Omir."

"You're right," I said, my voice steady. "Not everyone is like me. But you don't have to keep being the guy who gets dragged into jail over some baby mama drama. You're better than this, O'Shea, but you've gotta want it for yourself."

Silence hung heavily in the car for a moment, and I glanced over at him. His face was set, his pride clearly wounded, but I didn't care. He needed to hear it.

"Look, I love you," I said, softening my tone. "But I can't keep bailing you out. You've got to grow up, man. For Juice, if not for yourself."

O'Shea exhaled sharply, rubbing the back of his neck. "Yeah, I hear you," he muttered, though his tone made it clear he wasn't ready to fully admit it.

I let it go, for now. There was no point in pushing further.

He'd either get it or he wouldn't. But as I pulled up to his apartment and watched him get out of the car, I couldn't shake the feeling that this cycle was far from over.

He gave me a quick nod before disappearing inside, and as I drove away, I could only hope that someday, he'd figure his shit out.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:15 am

LENNOX

“Let’s focus on the numbers for the Crawley Group,” I said, pacing the length of the conference room. My heels clicked against the hardwood floor, echoing in the otherwise quiet space.

A dozen eyes were on me as I gestured toward the projector screen, where our latest profit-and-loss statement was displayed. “We exceeded projections by six percent, but I want to aim for ten next quarter with this next group. What ideas do we have to push these numbers even higher?”

A hand shot up at the far end of the table. I nodded at Enid, one of my sharpest analysts. “We could explore diversifying our client portfolio,” she suggested. “Target smaller businesses in emerging markets instead of just focusing on the heavyweights.”

“Good,” I said, jotting it down in my notebook. “Let’s flesh that out in next week’s strategy session. Anyone else?”

The meeting carried on like clockwork—questions, suggestions, assignments. This was where I thrived, in my element, commanding the room with confidence and precision. But no matter how smoothly things went, I couldn’t ignore the nagging distraction creeping into my mind.

It had been just about a month since Omir.

A month since his kiss lingered on my lips, since his hands trailed across my skin,

since I'd felt his godly dick.

I shook the thought off as the meeting wrapped up.

"That's all for now. I expect to secure a new client by the end of the week. Let's make it happen, people."

As my team filed out of the room, I gathered my things, ready to retreat to my office. But before I could make it to the door, I heard a voice behind me.

"Great meeting, Lennox."

I turned to see Adrian, the new junior associate who'd joined our firm a couple of weeks ago. He was handsome, in a polished, textbook kind of way—smart, tall, light skin, low cut. And apparently, he thought he had a chance with me.

"Thanks, Adrian," I said, keeping my tone professional as I moved past him into the hall.

He fell into step beside me. "I was wondering if you had time to grab lunch today. I know this great little spot a few blocks away?—"

"I'm busy," I said, cutting him off with a polite but firm smile. "Maybe another time."

"You've been saying that all week," he said, grinning like he thought persistence was charming.

I stopped walking and turned to face him. "And yet, you keep asking," I said, arching an eyebrow.

He chuckled, holding his hands up in mock surrender. “Can’t blame a brotha for trying.”

I didn’t bother responding, just offered him a curt nod before continuing down the hall. He was harmless, but he wasn’t what I wanted.

What I wanted was Omir.

I tried to push the thought away, but it was no use. His image was etched into my mind—the way he smiled, the way he touched me, the way he looked at me like I was the only woman in the world.

By the time I made it to my office, my pussy was throbbing intensely.

This wasn’t me. I was focused, disciplined, the kind of woman who didn’t get hung up on men.

He was the first. There I was, longing for a man I’d told myself I didn’t want.

My body ached with a need I hadn’t allowed myself to acknowledge fully until now.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I grabbed my phone and dialed Sherelle. “Hey, girl,” she answered on the second ring. “I’m in the middle of training a client, but what’s up?”

“Sorry. I didn’t even check the time,” I said, walking to my desk and dropping into my chair. “I need a favor.”

“Oh, this should be good. Hey, hun. Take five, okay? Now, back to you. What kind of favor?”

“Are you free tonight? I was thinking we could go to Omir’s club.”

Sherelle let out a long, dramatic sigh. “Girl, you don’t need me as your wing woman. If you want to see Omir, just go see him.”

“It’s not about that.” I protested, though my voice lacked conviction.

“Uh-huh. So you just happen to want to spend your night at his jazz club, listening to live music and possibly running into him?” she teased.

“Sherelle.”

“Lennox,” she said, mimicking my exasperated tone. “You’re not fooling me. Just admit you wanna see him.”

I bit my lip, staring at the papers scattered across my desk. “Fine. Maybe I do. But I don’t want to make it obvious.”

“Girl, it’s already obvious. You’ve been thinking about him since you left his house, haven’t you?”

” I didn’t respond, which was all the answer she needed.

“Look,” Sherelle continued, her tone softening.

“You don’t need me there to hold your hand.

If you want to see him, go see him. Life’s too short to play these games with yourself.
”

I sighed. “You’re right.”

“I’m always right,” she said smugly. “Now go. And call me after.”

We hung up, and I leaned back in my chair, staring at the ceiling. Sherelle’s words echoed in my mind, and I realized she was right.

Enough overthinking.

I grabbed my purse and jacket, my heart racing as I made the abrupt decision to leave the office.

I didn’t even bother making excuses to my assistant or checking my calendar.

As I stepped outside into the midday sun, my body was buzzing with anticipation.

I wasn’t just going to Omir’s club. I was going to Omir.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:15 am

OMIR

The sharp scent of lemons from the polished bar lingered in the air as I walked through the club, clipboard in hand, making last-minute adjustments for the speed-dating night we had on deck.

Jazz and romance—that was the vibe. I wanted the club to evolve, stay fresh.

But no matter how polished the setup looked, my thoughts were off.

They kept drifting. . . to her.

It had been weeks since Lennox walked out of my life, and every damn day since, she lived rent-free in my mind. Her laugh, the way she used to roll her eyes before giving in, the scent of her skin when I kissed her shoulder in the morning. That woman? She didn't just leave a mark—she branded me.

“Micah, make sure the lights shift to that low amber glow before the first round starts. We're not killin' nobody's vibe with overhead fluorescents.”

Micah smirked and wiped the counter. “You got it. I'll keep it smooth until the quartet starts.”

I gave him a nod, trying to lock back in. “And the food?”

“Trays are tight. Wine's chillin'. Nicole's running the pairings.”

Perfect. The club had always been more than just a business—it was my therapy, my creative outlet. But tonight, nothing was working to distract me. Because she wasn't here.

Then Micah said it. “Yo, O. . . someone's here.”

I turned toward the door and damn near forgot how to breathe.

Lennox.

She stood in the entryway like she owned the light behind her.

Fitted black skirt hugging every inch of those hips.

White blouse tucked in just right, heels clicking like a metronome to my pulse.

Hair up in that effortless bun with a few tendrils framing her face like she stepped out of a daydream.

And those eyes? Locked on mine, not a hint of hesitation.

No smile. No words. Just heat.

“Boss?” Micah's voice sounded a mile away.

“Huh?”

“I'm gonna grab some things. Be back in a half.”

I didn't even answer. My eyes were on her, and when I looked back, the door was already locked. Lennox stepped in. One click of the lock. One step closer.

And then her mouth was on mine.

No warning. No preamble. Just raw, hungry, soul-snatching need.

That kiss told me everything—she'd missed me too.

Her lips were fire, tongue tangling with mine like she needed me to survive.

I dropped the clipboard, grabbed her waist, pulled her so tight against me it was like I wanted to fuse us together.

Her hands threaded through my hair, her nails scraping lightly over my scalp, and I groaned into her mouth. “Fuck, I missed you,” I growled, already walking her back toward my office, never breaking the kiss.

Buttons popped. Clothes hit the floor. She was frantic, and I was just as bad. We stumbled into the office, the door slamming shut behind us. Before I could blink, she had my shirt open, her lips all over my chest, her breath hot and shaky.

“You gonna fuck me like you missed me?” she whispered, her voice dipped in sin.

I looked her dead in the eye. “Hell yeah.”

In one motion, I spun her, pinned her to the wall, and slid her skirt up past her hips. She wore the sexiest pair of black lace panties, already damp, clinging to her like second skin. I yanked them down and dropped to my knees.

“Spread your legs.”

She obeyed, breath trembling, back arched against the wall.

Her pussy was right in front of me—plump, juicy, glistening. That scent? That sweet, intoxicating aroma that could bring a man to his knees without effort? Yeah. I dove in.

I licked slowly at first, savoring her. Letting her feel every flick of my tongue as I slid through her folds, deliberately avoiding her clit.

“Oh my God, Omir,” she gasped, hands gripping my head. “Pleaseeeee. . .”

I looked up and smirked. I sucked her clit into my mouth and hummed low, sending vibrations through her body. She jerked, legs trembling, but I held her steady—one hand gripping her thigh, the other sliding under her ass, pulling her forward so I could bury my face deeper in her.

Her moans were filthy. Desperate. She rocked against my mouth like her body didn’t know how to stop. I tongue-fucked her, let her grind on my face, let her ride it until her legs started shaking and her moans turned into sobs.

“I’m—Omir, I’m gonna—shit—don’t stop,” she cried.

I didn’t. I ate her like she was my last meal, licking up her wetness like she was sacred. Her pussy clamped down on my tongue, and she shattered right there against the wall, cumming so hard her knees buckled. I had to hold her up.

When she came down, her breath was ragged, lips parted, eyes glassy with lust. “Damn,” she whispered. “I forgot how dangerous your mouth is.”

I stood, licked her taste from my lips, and kissed her hard.

Then I scooped her up and carried her to my desk, laying her back and unbuckling my belt with one hand.

“Take it off,” I said, nodding to her blouse.

She tore it open, her bra following, tits spilling out, nipples dark and hard.

She reached for me, but I caught her wrists and pressed them above her head. “Let me look at you first.”

That body? Still undefeated. Curves for days. Her pussy was still glistening, her thighs slick, breath shallow. I released my dick, thick and hard, and guided the tip to her entrance. “You ready for me?” She nodded, biting her lip. “Nah. I need to hear you say it.”

“I’m ready,” she whispered. “I want all of it.”

I slid in slow, inch by inch, her walls gripping me like velvet heat. She moaned loud, back arching off the desk.

“Shit, you feel better than I remember,” I groaned, hips grinding into her. “You miss this dick, baby?”

She nodded, panting. “Yes. So fucking much.” I started slow, deep strokes that had her eyes rolling back. I watched her unravel—watched every twitch, every breathy moan, every plea. “Harder,” she begged.

I gave it to her. Gripped her hips and pounded into her, deep, dirty, deliberate strokes. The desk rocked beneath us, and she clawed at my back like she couldn’t handle it—but I knew better. She loved it.

“Say my name.”

“Omir,” she cried.

“Louder.”

“Omir!”

She came again—body locking up, pussy pulsing around me like she didn’t want to let go. And I lost it. I pulled out quick, stroking myself fast and hard until I exploded, thick ropes of cum splashing across her stomach and thighs.

She lay there, chest heaving, a dazed look in her eye. I leaned over her, kissed her lips, her forehead, her shoulder. “So,” I began, my voice low, “what now?”

Lennox stiffened slightly, then shifted to sit up, pulling the edges of her blouse back together.

Her eyes flicked to mine briefly before she looked away, her fingers fumbling with the buttons left on it.

“I don’t know,” she said softly, climbing off me.

Her voice was calm, but there was a tension beneath it that I couldn’t ignore.

“You don’t know?”

She sighed, running a hand down her skirt. “Omir, we both know what this is. It’s just. . . sex. Amazing sex. But?—”

“But,” I echoed, feeling the weight of that single word like a punch to the gut.

She glanced at me, her gaze hesitant. “Nothing has changed. I still don’t want. . . anything serious or complicated. What we’re doing is just fine.”

Complicated. That's what this was to her. What I was to her. I adjusted my clothes, trying to keep my frustration in check. "You think I wanna keep doing this shit, Lennox? I told you from jump it's more than just sex for me. You think this is all I want? I want you."

"No," she said quickly, her tone almost apologetic. "It's just. . . my life is so structured, so planned out. I don't even know where something serious would fit."

I let out a short, humorless laugh. "I hear you." I walked to the door, neither of us speaking. "Enjoy the rest of your day, Lennox."

She followed my movements with her eyes, biting her lip like she wanted to say more but didn't know how. "Omir. . ."

"Take care, Lennox," I replied, keeping my tone even.

As she stepped into the hallway, she turned back, her expression conflicted. She didn't respond, and I didn't wait for her to. I shut the door, leaning against it as I exhaled a long breath.

The space felt emptier now, colder somehow. I couldn't lie to myself—Lennox was under my skin, in my head, and the fact that she couldn't or wouldn't let herself admit there was something between us was frustrating as hell.

The frustration bubbled inside me, but it wasn't just anger. It was disappointment. I wanted more with her—so much more. But I wasn't about to beg.

I rested my head in my hands, letting out a deep sigh. "Lennox," I muttered to myself, her name tasting bittersweet on my tongue.

LENNOX

S unday dinners at my parents' house were a ritual. No matter how busy we were, we were expected to show up, no excuses. And if you dared to miss one, you'd be met with a guilt trip long enough to last until the next meal.

As I stood in front of my closet, rifling through rows of neatly hung dresses and blouses, I couldn't help but feel a little apprehensive about tonight.

My family didn't let anything slide—not my career-focused single life, not my refusal to settle down, and definitely not the fact that I was the only one still coming to these dinners alone.

I finally settled on a simple black dress and heels and pulled my hair up into a sleek bun.

A few touches of makeup, I glanced at my reflection in the mirror as I applied a quick coat of lip gloss, smoothing the edges with my finger.

My thoughts drifted, as they often did lately, to Omir.

It had been days since I'd seen him at his club, but the memory of our last encounter lingered like a song stuck on repeat.

I sighed, pushing the thought aside. Tonight wasn't about him or the mess of feelings I couldn't seem to sort out. Tonight was about family, and I needed to focus.

The smell of collard greens and baked macaroni greeted me the moment I stepped into my parents' house, wrapping me in warmth and nostalgia. My mother's voice rang out from the kitchen, sharp and commanding, as she instructed my older sister, Lorna, to properly set the table.

"Lennox!" Dad's deep voice boomed from the living room. He was sitting in his favorite recliner, a beer in hand and the game playing softly on the television.

"Hey, Daddy," I said, leaning down to kiss his cheek.

He smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "How's my baby girl? Still out there conquering the world?"

"Something like that," I said with a small laugh, standing up straight.

"Better be careful, or you'll scare off all the men," he teased, shaking his head.

I rolled my eyes. "Not you too."

"Lenny!" my mother called from the kitchen, saving me from having to reply. "Come help me with the cornbread."

I slipped off my heels and made my way to the kitchen, where my mother was bustling around, apron tied tightly around her waist. Lorna, visibly pregnant and glowing, was placing plates on the table while my brother Lawrence was sneaking a taste of the sweet potatoes.

"Get your. . ." Mom swatted his hand away with a wooden spoon. "That's for the table!"

"Come on, Ma. You know I can't resist," Lawrence said with a grin, his gold

wedding band catching the light as he reached for another piece.

“Lennox, make yourself useful,” Mom said, nodding toward the pan of cornbread on the stove.

I grabbed the pan and began slicing the cornbread into neat squares, listening to the familiar chatter around me.

“Where’s Olivia?” I asked Lawrence, referring to his wife.

“She’s out back with the kids,” he said, popping a piece of sweet potato into his mouth. “Giving me a break before I have to chase them around again.”

“And your fiancé?” I asked Lorna, glancing at her.

“Darnell is parking the car,” she said, her hand resting on her swollen belly. “He better hurry up before Mom starts another one of her lectures.”

“Damn right,” Mom muttered, stirring a pot of collard greens. “A man’s supposed to be on time for family dinner.”

The front door opened, and Darnell walked in, carrying a tray of desserts from the local bakery. “Sorry, Mama Anderson,” he said with a sheepish grin.

“Uh-huh,” Mom said, eyeing him but softening when she saw the desserts. “At least you brought something.”

Dinner was served shortly after, and the table was a masterpiece of southern cooking—fried chicken, baked macaroni, collard greens, candied yams, and honey cornbread. We all sat down to dig in and catch up.

“So, Lenny,” Olivia began, her tone light but teasing as she passed the fried chicken. “Any new developments in your love life?”

I paused mid-scoop of macaroni, giving her a pointed look. “I’m focused on work. You know that.”

“That’s what you always say.” Lawrence chimed in, leaning back in his chair.

“Come on, Lennox.” Darnell chortled. “Don’t tell us you’re not even dating.”

“She doesn’t have time for that,” Mom said, her tone both proud and exasperated. “She’s too busy being successful.”

“Well, it wouldn’t kill you to make some time,” Lorna said, raising an eyebrow. “You’re not getting any younger, you know.”

“Thanks for the reminder, Sis,” I said dryly, taking a sip of sweet tea.

“Leave her alone,” Dad said, cutting into his chicken. “If she’s happy, that’s all that matters.”

“Thank you, Daddy,” I said, giving him a grateful smile.

But even as I brushed off their comments, I couldn’t stop my thoughts from wandering.

They didn’t know about Omir, about the way he made me feel like I was coming alive for the first time in years.

And maybe that was the problem—I didn’t know what to do with those feelings, either.

As the conversation shifted to Lorna's upcoming baby shower and Lawrence's plans for a family vacation, I found myself retreating into my thoughts, the bickering from the kids around me fading into the background.

Omir's face flashed in my mind—his smile, the way he looked at me like I was the only thing that mattered. My chest tightened, a mix of longing and confusion swirling inside me.

"Lennox?" Mom's voice snapped me back to the present.

"Hmm?" I looked up, realizing everyone was staring at me.

"Pass the cornbread," she said, giving me a curious look.

I handed her the plate, forcing a smile as I tried to shake off the feeling that I was standing on the edge of something I couldn't quite define.

The following morning, I arrived at the office just before eight, my laptop bag slung over my shoulder. The weekend hadn't done much to quiet my mind. Dinner at my parents' house had left me feeling off-balance, and I couldn't shake my dad's words. "If she's happy, that's all that matters."

I pushed everything aside as I stepped off the elevator. This was a new week, and I needed to be focused.

"Morning, Ms. Anderson." The receptionist greeted me with a bright smile.

"Morning, Gracie," I replied with a nod, making my way to my office.

The air in the building felt charged, like something big was happening. My coworkers were huddled in small groups, whispering excitedly as I passed. I raised an eyebrow

but kept moving, determined to get a jump on my emails before the day spun out of control.

I had barely set my coffee down when the CEO, Mr. Harrington, appeared in my doorway. His tailored suit was impeccable as always, and his expression was unreadable. “Lennox, do you have a moment?” he asked, his tone neutral.

“Of course,” I said, standing quickly. “Everything alright?”

“Let’s talk in the conference room,” he said, gesturing for me to follow.

As we walked, my mind raced. Was this about the Crawley account? Had something gone wrong? Or was it something else entirely?

Inside the conference room, I was surprised to see two other senior executives seated at the table. Mr. Harrington closed the door behind us and motioned for me to sit.

“Lennox,” he began, folding his hands on the table, “we’ve been incredibly impressed with your performance over the years. Your ambition, your hard work and your leadership are all top tier. And, your role with the Reynolds merger and the Crawley account, were nothing short of exceptional.”

“Thank you,” I said cautiously, unsure of where this was headed.

“Because of that,” he continued, “we’ve decided to offer you a promotion to president.”

The words hung in the air for a moment before they fully registered. A promotion. President. This was what I’d been working toward for years. “That’s. . . that’s incredible,” I said, a smile breaking across my face. “Thank you so much. I’m honored.”

“There’s just one thing though,” he said, his tone shifting slightly.

“Okay. . .” I said slowly, my stomach tightening.

“The position is based in Chicago,” he explained. “President of our sister company. You’d need to relocate within the next month to the company apartment. Your salary will triple, and you’ll even receive a very generous promotion bonus, along with a company car.”

My smile faltered. Chicago? I loved my city, my home. My life was here in Arbor Hills. Moving to a new city was a monumental change—one I hadn’t even considered.

“I understand it’s a big decision,” Mr. Harrington said, sensing my hesitation. “Take a few days to think it over. We’ll need an answer by Friday.”

I nodded, my thoughts spinning. “Thank you. I’ll let you know soon.”

As I returned to my office, the whispers in the hallway made sense now. News like this always traveled fast. I closed my door and sat at my desk, staring at my computer screen without really seeing it.

This was everything I’d worked for, the next step in my career.

But it also meant leaving behind everything—and everyone—I knew.

My family, my friends, my life. . . and Omir.

Omira. His name hit me like a weight, heavier than I expected.

We weren’t even a couple, so why did the thought of leaving him feel like such a

loss?

A knock at my door pulled me from my thoughts. It was Adrian. “Hey, superstar,” he said, leaning casually against the doorframe. “Congrats on the promotion.”

“Thanks,” I said, forcing a smile.

“So, Chicago, huh?” he said, stepping inside. “Big move for a big opportunity.”

“Yeah, it’s a lot to think about,” I admitted, wishing he’d leave.

“Well, if anyone can handle it, it’s you,” he said, his tone flirtatious.

“Thanks, Adrian,” I said, my voice cool.

He lingered for a moment longer, clearly hoping for more conversation, but I didn’t give him an opening. Finally, he left, and I exhaled in relief.

The rest of the morning was a blur of half-hearted work and constant thoughts swirling in my mind.

I couldn’t focus, not with the weight of the promotion—and the move—bearing down on me.

By lunchtime, I couldn’t take it anymore.

I grabbed my phone, stepped into the privacy of the breakroom, and called Sherelle.

It only took two rings before she picked up.

“Lennox! What’s up, girl?”

“Sherelle,” I said, exhaling deeply.

“Uh-oh,” she said, her voice immediately intrigued. “Spill it.”

“I got offered a promotion this morning,” I said, taking a deep breath. “They’re finally making me President. It’s the role I’ve been working toward for years.”

“Lenny! That’s amazing!” she exclaimed. “Congratulations, girl! All those late nights and sacrifices paid off.”

“Thanks,” I said, but my tone must have given something away.

“Wait a minute,” she said, the excitement in her voice dimming. “You don’t sound happy. What’s wrong?”

“It’s in Chicago, Relle,” I admitted.

There was a pause. “Chicago? Like, you’d have to move?”

“Yep. I’d need to be there in a month if I accept.”

“Damn,” she said. “That’s a big move.”

“Tell me about it,” I muttered, running a hand through my hair.

“So what’s the problem? This is what you’ve been busting your ass for, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I said, slumping into a chair. “It is. But leaving means giving up everything I have here—my friends, my family. . .” I hesitated, biting my lip.

“And Omir,” Sherelle finished for me.

“Sherelle,” I groaned.

“What? Am I wrong?” she asked.

“We’re not even a thing,” I said quickly.

“Doesn’t mean you don’t want to be,” she shot back. I stayed quiet, unable to deny it.

“Lennox, let me ask you something,” she said, her tone softer now. “If Omir didn’t come along, would you even be hesitating about this move?”

I opened my mouth to respond, but no words came out.

“That’s what I thought,” she said. “Look, I’m not saying you should give up this opportunity. But maybe you owe it to yourself—and to him—to figure out how you really feel before you make such a big decision. You might regret it if you don’t.”

I let her words sink in, staring blankly at the breakroom wall. “Thanks, Relle,” I said, feeling a small wave of gratitude.

“Anytime, girl.”

As I hung up, her words replayed in my mind. Figure out how you really feel. It sounded so simple, but nothing about this felt simple.

I stared out the breakroom window, the city bustling below me. I had a decision to make—a life-changing one—and no matter what I chose, I knew things would never be the same.

OMIR

The clang of weights hitting the rack echoed around the gym as I finished my last set of chest presses.

I sat up, grabbing my towel to wipe the sweat off my face, feeling the burn in my arms and chest. Mornings at the gym had become part of my routine, a way to clear my mind and set the tone for the day.

But lately, clearing my mind had been damn near impossible. No matter how hard I pushed myself or how much I tried to focus, she kept creeping back in. Lennox. Her face, her damn scent—every part of her was etched into my brain like she'd carved it there herself.

I gritted my teeth and headed to the squat rack, determined to push her out with sheer force of will. She wasn't my woman. Hell, she made it crystal clear she didn't want to be. One night—that was all it was. I knew that going in. And yet, she'd been in my head ever since.

I racked the barbell after my last set and grabbed my water bottle. The gym was starting to fill up with the early risers, but I barely noticed. My phone vibrated on the bench, and I glanced down to see Sherelle's name flashing on the screen. What could she want this early?

I swiped to answer. "Yo, Relle. What's up?"

"Hey, O," she said, her tone unusually serious.

“What’s going on?” I asked, already sensing this wasn’t a social call.

“I just thought you should know,” she started, pausing like she was trying to find the right words. “Lennox got offered a promotion. President.”

I frowned, grabbing my towel and heading toward the quieter corner of the gym. “That’s big. Good for her,” I said, though my chest tightened at the mention of her name.

“Yeah, it’s a big deal,” Sherelle said. “But the position’s in Chicago. President of the sister company.”

I froze for a second before leaning against the wall. “Chicago?”

“Yep. She’d have to move in a month if she accepts,” Sherelle said. “She hasn’t decided yet, but. . . I figured you’d want to know.”

“Why would I need to know that shit?” I said, keeping my tone even.

“Come on, Omir,” she said, exasperated. “You and I both know you care.”

I exhaled through my nose, gripping the phone tighter. “I care. And? But Lennox is a grown ass woman. She can make her own decisions. I’m not about to get in her way.”

“She hasn’t decided yet,” Sherelle pressed.

“And if she does? Good for her. That’s a huge opportunity,” I said, forcing my voice to stay steady.

Sherelle sighed on the other end. “You’re not even gonna talk to her, are you?”

“Nah, I’m straight,” I said firmly. “She made it clear what she wanted, Relle. I’m not about to chase after someone who’s already running in the opposite direction.”

“O,” she started, but I cut her off.

“Relle, I appreciate the call, but it doesn’t change anything. Lennox’s gotta do what’s best for her. And I’ll do the same.” Ending the call, I stood there for a moment, staring at my phone, before shoving it back in my pocket. My chest felt tight, and not from the workout.

Lennox in Chicago. That would be it then.

No more chances, no more trying. Maybe that was for the best. But damn, it was hard to shake the feeling that she was supposed to be more than just a passing memory.

I grabbed my shit and headed for the locker room.

Maybe it was time to stop letting her take up so much space in my head.

If she wanted to leave, I wasn’t going to stop her.

But as much as I told myself I didn’t care, a part of me couldn’t help but wonder what it would’ve been like if she’d stayed.

The club was alive that night, buzzing with energy as patrons filled every corner, eager to witness the return of Derwin Grant, the hometown kid turned jazz sensation.

It was the first celebrity event at my club, and I couldn’t have asked for a better turnout.

The warm amber lights reflected off polished tables, the scent of top-shelf whiskey

lingered in the air, and the low hum of conversation filled the gaps between the saxophonist's sound check.

I moved through the crowd, greeting regulars and newcomers alike, my sharp navy suit fitting like a second skin.

Derwin's team had already set up in the back, and the man himself was on stage, running through a few final notes on his trumpet.

The guy was a genius. His sound was smooth, effortless, with a touch of grit that hit you in the chest.

The event was going off without a hitch, but my mind was elsewhere, or rather on someone else.

Even as I worked the room, Lennox's face flickered through my thoughts like an old film reel.

I'd told myself this morning I needed to let her go, but damn, it was hard when I could still feel the imprint of her lips, the warmth of her skin.

"Omigod!" someone called, snapping me out of my thoughts.

I turned to see one of my bartenders waving me over. I nodded and crossed the room, weaving through the crowd. The bar was packed three-deep, customers clamoring for their drinks, and I pitched in to help for a few minutes, pouring cognac and mixing a couple of Old Fashioneds.

As I handed off the last drink, I felt a tap on my shoulder.

I turned to find a woman standing there—a gorgeous woman, with caramel-toned

skin, piercing hazel eyes, a body that could stop traffic, and a smile that could disarm anyone in seconds.

She wore a fitted emerald-green dress that hugged her curves and sparkled subtly in the low light.

“Omir, right?” she asked, her voice smooth, with a hint of playfulness.

“That’s me,” I said, flashing a polite smile. “How can I help you?”

“Actually, I was hoping to help you,” she said, leaning a little closer. “I’ve heard great things about this place, but I have to say, seeing the owner in person makes it even better.”

I chuckled lightly, my usual charm kicking in. “Well, I’m glad to hear it. Welcome to the club.”

“Thanks,” she said, her eyes locking onto mine. “I’m Anya, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you, Anya,” I said, extending a hand.

Instead of shaking it, she let her fingers linger against mine for a moment too long.

“Likewise.” There was a beat of silence, and I knew what this was.

She wasn’t here to compliment the club. She was here for me.

“So,” she said, tilting her head slightly, “does the owner of this fine establishment ever take a break to enjoy life outside? Or are you always this busy?”

Her confidence was magnetic, and under different circumstances, I might’ve been

completely drawn in. But as I looked at her, the image of Lennox crept into my mind again. Her wit, her fire, the way she'd left me both satisfied and frustrated after our last encounter.

For a moment, I hesitated. Then, I pushed the thought aside. Lennox made her choice. She wasn't here, and I wasn't about to sit around waiting for something that wasn't going to happen.

"I think I can make an exception one of these nights," I said, my smile widening as I leaned against the bar. "What are you drinking?"

Her smile deepened, triumphant. "Surprise me."

I nodded to the bartender, signaling for a bottle of champagne. "How about we start with a glass of something celebratory?"

"Perfect," she said, her hazel eyes sparkling.

As the bartender poured the champagne, Anya and I fell into easy conversation. She was charming, quick-witted, and clearly knew how to hold someone's attention.

The champagne flowed, the jazz music swelled, and the crowd buzzed around us. Maybe this was what I needed. A fresh start. Something—or someone—to help me quickly get Lennox out of my system. And tonight, Anya seemed like the perfect place to start.

LENNOX

I ran my fingers through my fresh silk pressed hair, admiring the sleekness in the rearview mirror. “Self-care,” I muttered to myself as I pulled out of the salon parking lot.

The Thursday afternoon sun was relentless, glinting off the windshield as I drove through the city.

I had one more day, one day to decide if I was going to uproot my life for this promotion.

“President,” I said aloud, testing how the words sounded coming from my lips.

A small part of me swelled with pride, but the larger part felt. . . unsure.

The offer was everything I’d worked toward. The culmination of late nights, canceled vacations, and every time I’d chosen my career over everything else. But Chicago wasn’t just another city; it was a fresh start. A clean slate. And wasn’t that what I always said I wanted?

I tapped my fingers against the steering wheel, my mind flipping through the pros and cons for the thousandth time. Chicago meant advancement. Bigger paychecks, bigger opportunities, bigger lifestyle.

It had been two weeks since I’d walked out of Omir’s office, and I couldn’t stop replaying every moment we’d spent together. The pull between us was undeniable,

even when I tried to convince myself it was just physical. But was it? As I hit a red light, I sighed, gripping the wheel tighter.

“Get it together, Lennox,” I scolded myself. I wasn’t the kind of woman who let a man cloud her judgment. But Omir wasn’t just any man.

Before I knew it, I found myself driving toward his neighborhood, the streets growing quieter and more residential as I got closer.

I told myself I was just. . . checking in.

Closure. Maybe even goodbye. I wasn’t sure what I was expecting, but I had to see him.

My heart raced as I parked across the street, my palms slick against the steering wheel.

I stepped out of the car, adjusting my blouse nervously.

The house was quiet, the curtains drawn, and I hesitated at the foot of his driveway, debating whether I should turn back.

“Stop being ridiculous,” I whispered, steeling myself as I climbed the three steps to his door.

Just as I raised my hand to ring the doorbell, the door swung open, and I froze.

Omir stood there, bare-chested in a pair of low-hanging basketball shorts, his tattoos on full display against his chiseled chest. His skin gleamed faintly, like he’d just showered—or done something else.

Behind him, a gorgeous woman followed, her hair disheveled in that unmistakable “just woke up” way.

She was tall, with smooth skin, full lips, and a figure that made my heart sink.

“Oh,” I blurted, my voice sharper than I intended.

Omir’s face was blank, his dark eyes giving nothing away as he glanced at me. The woman leaned in, pressing a kiss to his cheek, her hand brushing his arm. “I’ll call you later,” she said, her voice light and flirtatious.

“Cool,” he replied, a small smile tugging at his lips.

Her gaze flickered to me, lingering just long enough to make me feel small, before she walked past, her heels clicking against the pavement as she headed to her car.

I stood there, rooted to the spot, my chest tight as I watched her drive off. My throat burned with the effort it took to keep my composure.

“What are you doing here?” Omir asked casually, leaning against the doorframe.

I glared at him, my emotions bubbling dangerously close to the surface. “Seriously?”

“What?” he asked, his tone indifferent.

“You’re really going to stand there like you didn’t just walk another woman out of your house?” I snapped.

Omir’s expression didn’t waver. “What the hell did you expect, Lennox? You made it clear where we stood.”

My breath hitched, his words slicing through me. “Are you kidding me right now?”

He shrugged, folding his arms over his chest. “You said it was just sex. That you didn’t want anything serious. So I’m living my life. Or does that shit only apply to you?”

“I’m not. . .” I clenched my fists, struggling to find the words. “I didn’t think?—”

“You didn’t think what?” he interrupted, his voice calm but sharp. “That I would do me? That I’d take you at your word?”

Tears stung the back of my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. “You’re unbelievable,” I hissed.

“No, Lennox,” he said, stepping closer. “You’re selfish as fuck. You show up here out of nowhere, and for what? To see if I’m still waiting around for your ass? Newsflash—I’m not.”

The words hit me like a slap, but I straightened my spine, refusing to crumble. “You know what?” I said, my voice trembling with anger. “It doesn’t even matter. I came to tell you I’m moving to Chicago anyway. I got a promotion, and I’m taking it.”

Omir’s expression remained infuriatingly blank. “Congrats,” he said flatly.

I stared at him, my heart breaking even as fury surged through me. “You can forget any of this ever happened,” I spat.

“Already done,” he replied, his tone devoid of emotion as he stepped back, closing the door.

I turned on my heel, storming down the steps and back to my car. My hands shook as

I fumbled with the keys, my vision blurring as tears threatened to spill. As I slid into the driver's seat, I allowed one tear to fall, but only one. I didn't have time for heartbreak. Not now. Not ever.

With a deep breath, I started the engine and drove off, leaving Omir and everything we could've been in the rearview mirror.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:15 am

ONE YEAR LATER

OMIR

The oversized scissors felt heavier than I expected, but the weight of the moment made up for it.

Standing outside the entrance of my new southern cuisine restaurant, Notes of Soul, I looked out at the crowd gathered before me—friends, family, city officials, and curious people who'd come to celebrate the grand opening.

The air smelled like promise, smoked turkey collards, and honey-glazed cornbread. I inhaled deeply, my chest swelling with pride as I cut the crimson ribbon stretched across the front doors. The cheers and applause that followed were thunderous, filling the street with excitement.

I handed the scissors off to one of my staff, shaking hands and offering nods of gratitude to everyone who had supported me in getting here. Notes of Soul wasn't just a restaurant; it was a dream come to life. A space dedicated to great food, the history of jazz, and the soul of our culture.

This past year had been a whirlwind. Between managing the jazz club, securing funding, and obsessing over every detail of the restaurant, I'd grown in ways I didn't think were possible. I was no longer the man I was a year ago—searching, unsure, and tangled in emotions I couldn't control.

The jazz club was thriving, hosting artists from across the country. And now, this

restaurant—my second dream—was finally a reality. Every late night, every setback, and every doubt had been worth it.

“Omir.”

I turned at the sound of her voice and saw Anya walking toward me, her caramel skin glowing in the late afternoon sunlight. She was stunning, as always, in a white mink coat and soft blue dress that hugged her curves perfectly. Her smile was radiant as she leaned in and kissed my cheek.

“There are some people I want you to meet, babe,” she said, sliding her arm through mine.

“Of course,” I said, allowing her to guide me through the crowd.

As we moved, I couldn’t help but think about how much had happened in a year.

Anya and I were still rocking. She was beautiful and understanding.

She came from money and didn’t need mine, but I loved providing.

Our connection had grown naturally from that night at my club.

Now, she was my fiancée, and our wedding was only six weeks away.

I glanced down at her as she spoke with a city official, her voice smooth and confident. She carried herself with grace, and I admired how she fit into this world I was building.

“Mr. Harper,” one of the officials said, shaking my hand firmly. “This is a fantastic addition to the city. We’re excited to see the impact it will have.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Notes of Soul is about more than just food—it’s about history, connection, and community. I’m honored to bring this vision to life.”

“And you’ve done an amazing job.” Anya chimed in, beaming at me. “He’s been working nonstop for months to make this happen.”

I nodded, accepting the praise but feeling a small twinge of something I couldn’t quite name. Pride, sure—but also disbelief at how far I’d come.

After a few more introductions and photos, Anya and I finally stepped inside. The restaurant was packed, every table filled with customers enjoying the food and ambiance. Smooth jazz played softly in the background, blending perfectly with the chatter and clinking of glasses.

“This is incredible, babe,” Anya said, squeezing my hand.

“It is,” I replied, scanning the room to make sure everything was running smoothly. “How are we looking on the wedding planning?”

“We’re ahead of schedule,” she said with a playful smirk. “But you still owe me your guest list.”

I chuckled. “I’ll get to it. Things have just been. . . busy.”

“I know,” she said, her tone softening. “But don’t forget, this is important too.”

“I haven’t forgotten,” I assured her.

She smiled, leaning up to kiss me. “Good. Now let’s make sure everyone’s enjoying themselves.”

As we moved through the restaurant, greeting guests and checking in with staff, I couldn't ignore the sense of contentment that had settled over my life.

I was in a good place, professionally and personally.

Anya was everything I thought I wanted in a partner: smart, supportive, and easy to be with.

But sometimes, late at night when I closed my eyes, a different face would slip into my thoughts. One I hadn't seen in a year but still lingered in the shadows of my mind.

I shook the thought away, focusing on the moment. I had everything I needed, and I wasn't about to jeopardize it by looking back. This was my life now. And I was determined to make it work.

LENNOX

The smell of bacon tickled my nose as I stirred awake, the silk sheets cool against my skin. My first thought was that I must be dreaming—no one else had the key to my apartment. Well, no one except the man who had no business still being there.

I sighed, slipping out of bed and shrugging on my robe.

My feet slid into my plush slippers as I made my way through the vast expanse of my high-rise apartment.

It was one of the perks of my new position.

This place screamed success. Floor-to-ceiling windows showcased the city skyline, the sleek marble floors gleamed, and every piece of furniture was handpicked for style and comfort.

I loved my apartment. It was a symbol of everything I'd worked for—leaving Arbor Hills, uprooting my life, and throwing myself into running the new Chicago firm as president.

The past year had been everything I dreamed of professionally.

Our numbers were unmatched, and I'd earned a reputation as a force to be reckoned with in the corporate world.

Promotions, bonuses, and accolades poured in like clockwork.

I thought back to the ribbon-cutting ceremony last quarter, where I stood next to the CEO, my tailored suit and polished confidence stealing the show.

That was the life I had built—success, independence, and prestige.

There was no room for distractions or compromises.

Relationships? Love? They were the last thing on my mind, or at least that was what I kept telling myself.

But beneath the surface of my independence, my career, and my wealth, there was. . . something missing.

Loneliness crept in when I let my mind linger too long, but I didn't dwell on it. Loneliness wasn't fatal; it was just a side effect of prioritizing my dreams over anything or anyone else. I'd live.

The smell of bacon grew stronger as I rounded the corner into the kitchen. Standing at my stove, flipping bacon like he owned the place, was Justin.

“Good morning, beautiful,” he said without turning around. His deep, husky voice grated on my nerves and pulled at something in my chest I didn't care to name.

I folded my arms, leaning against the doorframe. “Just, why are you still here? I told you last night?—”

“Yeah, yeah,” he interrupted, glancing over his shoulder with a smirk.

His long locs were pulled back into a low ponytail, revealing sharp cheekbones and a jawline that looked like it could cut glass.

His chest and arms—tattooed and chiseled—were bare, and he wore nothing but gray sweatpants slung low on his hips.

“I figured I’d make you breakfast,” he said.

“You work hard. You deserve someone to take care of you every once in a while.”

I sighed, stepping into the kitchen and sitting at the island. “I appreciate the thought, but we’ve talked about this. What we have?—”

“What we have is nothing more than the bedroom.” He interrupted again, this time setting the plate of bacon on the counter. “I’m tired of this shit, Lennox. Tired of coming over, fucking you down, and then being told to leave like I’m just?—”

“A good time?” I offered, raising an eyebrow.

His jaw clenched, and I could see the frustration bubbling beneath his calm demeanor. “This shit’s crazy,” he muttered. “You don’t let anyone in. Not really. Why do you even bother with me if all you want is sex?”

“Because you’re pretty good at it,” I said simply, my tone light. “And I enjoy our time. But I’ve told you from the beginning—I don’t want a relationship.”

Justin leaned against the counter, crossing his arms over his broad chest. “You keep saying that, but I think it’s because you’re scared. Scared to let someone see the real you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Spare me the psychoanalysis. You knew what this was from day one.”

He shook his head, grabbing his hoodie from the back of a chair and slipping it on.

“You’re gonna regret this one day, Lennox. Someone’s gonna come along and show you what you’re missing, and it won’t be me. I’m done with this shit.”

“Your loss,” I said, walking him to the door.

He paused at the threshold, looking at me with a mix of disappointment and sadness. “Take care of yourself, Lennox.”

“I always do,” I replied, shutting the door before he could say another word. For a moment, I stood there, staring at the closed door and feeling. . . nothing. Or at least, that was what I told myself.

“Alexa,” I said, shaking off the moment. “Play ‘Diva’ by Beyoncé.”

As the opening beat filled the air, I pranced through my apartment, shedding my robe and slippers and heading to my closet. Work was calling, and I had no time for feelings or regrets.

I pulled on a tailored pantsuit and stepped into my favorite red bottom heels. By the time I finished my makeup and styled my hair, I was back to feeling like myself—powerful, focused, untouchable.

As I drove through the busy streets of Chicago, the city seemed alive with energy, even in the early morning. The weather had finally broken to Spring, ridding the air of its frigid chill. My favorite coffee shop wasn’t far, and I needed my caffeine fix before diving into another demanding day.

I pulled into the small parking lot of Beans & Brews, my go-to coffee shop, at my usual time.

Stepping out of the car, I adjusted my oversized coat and headed inside.

As always, the line snaked around the quaint little café, filled with groggy customers clutching their phones and laptops.

But I didn't have time for lines. With a confident stride, I walked past everyone, cash already in hand.

"Excuse me!" a woman near the front of the line exclaimed, glaring at me. "There's a line here."

"Yeah, a long one." A man chimed in, scowling.

I barely glanced in their direction as I reached the counter. The barista, a young woman with bright red hair, smiled when she saw me. "Good morning, Ms. Anderson. Your usual?"

"Of course." I handed her the cash, ignoring the grumbles behind me.

The woman behind the counter handed me my coffee in record time, and I gave her a nod of thanks. Sliding on my sunglasses, I turned to leave, the heels of my designer pumps clicking confidently on the tiled floor.

"Must be nice," someone muttered as I passed, but I didn't care. I was used to it.

Out on the sidewalk, I sipped my coffee and let the warm liquid energize me for the day ahead. As I slid into my car, I placed the cup in the holder, pulled out my phone, and began scrolling through social media while navigating the morning traffic.

That was when I saw it.

The post was from Sherelle, and the image immediately caught my eye. A gold-and-white wedding invitation adorned with elegant calligraphy.

Omira & Anya.

I gripped the steering wheel as my eyes darted to the caption:

“Two amazing people tying the knot!

Can’t wait for the big day.

Love is such a beautiful thing.

#BlackLove #WeddingSeason”

My heart slammed against my ribs as my foot instinctively pressed the brake harder than necessary. The car jolted to a stop, and I barely registered the sound of the horn from the driver behind me. Hot coffee spilled out of the cup and onto my lap, soaking through my designer pants.

“Damn it!” I shouted, yanking a tissue from the center console to blot at the mess. My hands shook, not from the spill but from the storm of emotions swirling inside me.

Omira. Anya. Wedding.

The words felt like tiny knives slicing through my chest. Memories came flooding back—the day I stopped by his house and the gorgeous woman walking out.

The one he was now marrying. I also thought back to our nights together, the intensity, the heart flutters.

I thought I had buried those feelings a long time ago, choosing to focus on my career and leaving everything else behind.

But now, it was as if the past had clawed its way back to the surface, demanding to be acknowledged.

I gripped the steering wheel tighter, my mind racing. What if I hadn't pushed him away? What if I'd let myself feel more? What if I hadn't been so damn stubborn about staying in control?

A honk from the car behind me snapped me out of my daze.

I wiped my hands on another tissue, trying to compose myself as I pulled back into traffic.

But the image of that wedding invitation stayed with me, etched into my mind like a cruel reminder of what I had lost—or what I had never allowed myself to have.

I whispered under my breath, "What the hell are you doing, Lennox?"

The words hung in the air as I drove toward the office, but for the first time in a long time, I didn't feel like I had all the answers.

OMIR

It was midday, and the lunch rush had just settled.

The jazz tunes playing softly in the background gave the place the kind of vibe I'd always envisioned—warm, inviting, and steeped in culture.

I glanced at my watch, running a mental checklist of the day's tasks.

Between this place and the club, there was always something that needed my attention.

The double doors to the kitchen swung open, and Kurt, my head chef, emerged, wiping his hands on a towel. "Yo, boss, we're running low on the bourbon glaze for the ribs. You want me to adjust the recipe, or should I send someone to grab more?"

"Stick with the original," I replied, crossing my arms. "We're building a reputation on consistency. I'll make sure we have everything restocked by tomorrow. Anything else?"

He shook his head. "Nah, just keeping you in the loop."

"Appreciate it, man," I said, clapping him on the shoulder before he disappeared back into the kitchen.

I exhaled, letting my gaze sweep over the restaurant.

It had been open for just under a month, and already it was a neighborhood staple.

Families came for the food, tourists came for the history, and everyone left with a smile.

The soul food joint complemented the jazz club perfectly, a one-two punch of culture and community.

But no matter how much success I had, there was always that nagging feeling in the back of my mind. I tried to shake it off, focusing instead on the here and now. I had a good thing going—a thriving business, a woman who adored me, and a life that, by all accounts, should've felt complete.

Just as I was about to head back to my office, my phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out, smiling at Anya's name flashing on the screen. "Hey, baby," I answered, stepping into a quieter corner.

"Hey yourself," Anya's melodic voice came through. "Just checking in. Did you confirm the reservation for the final cake tasting next weekend? Time is ticking."

"Yeah, it's all set," I assured her. "Everything's gonna be perfect."

"Good. You know how much this means to me."

"I do," I said softly. "You've been planning this day since you were a little girl, right?"

She laughed. "Something like that. But it's not just about me. It's about us."

"Exactly," I said, leaning against the wall. "And you know I got you. Anything you need."

“You’re the best,” she said, her voice warm. “I’ll let you get back to work. Love you.”

“Love you too,” I replied before hanging up. I stared at the phone for a moment, the smile lingering on my face. Our wedding was just a month away. Still, there was that damn nagging feeling again, like an itch I couldn’t quite scratch.

Later that evening, I made my way to my father’s house.

After the passing of my mother a few years back, Pops refused to pack up and move, saying the house held too many memories.

The smell of fried chicken hit me the second I walked through the door.

Pops was already parked in his recliner, a beer in hand and the game blaring on the TV.

“Omigod, you’re late,” he said without looking up.

“I’m five minutes early,” I shot back, grinning as I leaned down to give him a hug.

“Fifteen minutes late in my book,” he retorted, motioning for me to grab a seat.

I settled into the couch, grabbing a beer from the cooler beside him. We sat in comfortable silence for a while, watching the game and shouting at the screen when our team missed an easy play.

“You’ve been busy,” Pops said during a commercial break, glancing at me.

“Always,” I said with a shrug. “Businesses don’t run themselves.”

“And you’ve got that wedding coming up too,” he added, taking a sip of his beer.

“Yeah, that too.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Sound a little too casual for a man about to get married.”

I chuckled. “Nah, I’m just focused. You know me—always thinking ten steps ahead.”

Pops nodded, but his eyes didn’t leave mine. “You sure this is what you want, Son?”

“What the hell kinda question is that?” I asked, sitting up straighter.

“The kind a father asks when his son seems like he’s going through the motions,” he said simply.

I sighed, running a hand over my face. “Pops, Anya’s great. She’s everything I could ask for.”

“That’s not what I asked,” he said, his tone gentle but firm.

I stared at the TV, the players moving across the screen in a blur. The truth was, I didn’t know how to answer his question. Anya was great—on paper, she was perfect. But deep down, I couldn’t shake the memory of Lennox. “Anya makes me happy,” I said finally, though the words felt hollow.

Pops studied me for a long moment before nodding. “Alright, then. If she makes you happy, that’s all that matters. Just make sure you’re not settling for less than you deserve—or giving her less than she deserves.”

I nodded, but his words stayed with me long after the game ended.

As I drove home that night, the city lights casting a soft glow on the pavement, my mind was a whirlwind of thoughts.

The words Pops had said earlier replayed in my head: “Just make sure you’re not settling for less than you deserve—or giving her less than she deserves.

” I had everything I’d ever wanted, but why did it feel like something was still missing?

I pulled into my driveway, cutting the engine.

For a moment, I just sat there in the silence, staring at the darkened windows of my house.

My phone buzzed with a notification from one of my businesses, but I ignored it.

Instead, I found myself opening Instagram, my thumb hesitating for just a second before I typed in her name.

Lennox Anderson.

Her profile picture was predictable: a shot of her standing in front of Chicago’s skyline, her smile dazzling and her posture radiating confidence. I thumbed over the picture, my chest tightening as her image stared back at me.

She hadn’t posted much recently, just a few photos from work events and one of a view from a rooftop patio.

Nothing too personal, nothing that hinted at what was really going on in her life.

But it didn’t matter. Seeing her again, even through a screen, brought back everything

I'd been trying to bury for the past year. Something I hadn't felt in a long time.

For a moment, I wondered, what if? What if I had fought harder for her? What if I hadn't let her walk away?

But then I remembered why I'd chosen to forget about her in the first place. Lennox didn't want what I wanted. She was focused on her career, her independence, her freedom. And I wasn't about to beg someone to stay who had already made it clear they weren't interested in forever.

I locked my phone and tossed it onto the passenger seat, running a hand over my face. Get it together, O.

I had a fiancée who loved me, a life I'd built with my own two hands, and a future that didn't include chasing what didn't want to be caught. Whatever I felt for Lennox was in the past, and that was where it needed to stay.

With a deep breath, I got out of the car and headed inside. But as I lay in bed that night, staring up at the ceiling, her face stayed with me. The what-ifs lingered, no matter how hard I tried to push them away.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:15 am

LENNOX

The vibration of my phone on the conference room table pulled my attention away from the presentation on screen.

I glanced down at the caller ID and saw Sherelle's name.

Perfect timing, I thought bitterly, already fuming from the wedding post I'd stumbled upon earlier.

I excused myself with a polite smile and a nod, stepping out of the glass-walled room into the hallway.

Sliding my thumb across the screen, I answered with a sharp tone. "You've got a lot of nerve, Sherelle."

"Good afternoon to you too," she said, her tone light and defensive.

"Don't 'good afternoon' me. Why the hell didn't you tell me Omir was seeing someone? Let alone getting married!" My voice was low but cutting, mindful of my surroundings but unable to hide the anger boiling just beneath the surface.

Sherelle sighed, clearly annoyed. "Lenny, it wasn't my business to tell you. And let's be honest. You made it clear you didn't want anything serious with him."

"That's not the point!" I snapped. "You knew this whole time, and you didn't think I'd want to know?"

“What exactly would you have done with that information?” she challenged. “You said it was just sex. You moved to Chicago. You’ve been living your life, girl. What does it matter now?”

“It matters because—” I stopped myself, swallowing the lump in my throat. I didn’t even know what I was trying to say.

“Because, what? You’re jealous?” Sherelle pressed, her voice sharper now.

I laughed bitterly. “Jealous? Please. It’s not jealousy, Relle. It’s just. . . I don’t know.”

Sherelle paused for a moment before responding, her tone softer now. “Lennox, if you don’t know, maybe you need to figure it out before you start coming at me like this. You’re the one who left. You’re the one who kept him at arm’s length. Don’t blame me because he moved on.”

Her words hit harder than I wanted to admit. My grip on the phone tightened. “You could’ve given me a heads-up, at least. I deserved that much.”

“You don’t deserve anything from him,” she said bluntly. “But if you’re so pressed about it, maybe you should reach out to Omir yourself instead of taking it out on me.”

I clenched my jaw, my pulse racing with frustration. “I gotta go,” I said curtly, ending the call before she could say anything else.

I stood there in the hallway for a moment, trying to gather myself.

My emotions were a tangled mess of anger, hurt, and something I didn’t even want to name.

But I didn't have time to wallow. I took a deep breath, squared my shoulders, and walked back into the conference room like nothing had happened.

The meeting wrapped up without any further interruptions, and I packed up my laptop, ready to escape to my office. As I headed for the door, Jevon, the VP I worked closely with, fell into step beside me.

"You were on fire in there," Jevon said, flashing me his signature charming smile.

"Thanks," I said, forcing a polite grin.

He studied me for a moment, his brown eyes warm but probing. "You seemed a little distracted when you stepped out earlier though. Everything okay?"

I hesitated, not wanting to delve into my personal life. "Just a phone call," I said dismissively. "Nothing to worry about."

Jevon nodded but didn't let it go. "Well, if you ever need a good distraction, you know I'm always up for dinner or drinks. Just say the word."

It wasn't the first time he'd asked me out.

Jevon was undeniably handsome. He exuded confidence, the kind that came with his position and a hefty bank account to match.

I usually turned him down without a second thought, but today, my resolve wavered.

Omir's face flashed in my mind. The thought of him getting married, starting a life with someone else, twisted something deep inside me.

"Dinner sounds nice," I said before I could talk myself out of it.

Jevon's eyebrows lifted in surprise, but he quickly recovered, his smile widening. "How about Friday night?"

"Friday works," I said with a nod, trying to sound casual.

"Perfect."

We exchanged numbers, and I gave him a tight smile as he walked away, my stomach churning with conflicting emotions.

I didn't want Jevon. I didn't want anyone, really.

But maybe this date could serve as a distraction, a way to remind myself that I had options, that I didn't need to cling to whatever feelings I still had for Omir.

As I headed back to my office, I tried to convince myself that I was making the right decision. But deep down, I couldn't shake the nagging thought that I was only running from something I didn't know how to face.

After wrapping up a long day at the office, I decided to hit the gym in my building. It had been weeks since I last worked out, and I hoped sweating it out would help clear my head. Omir had taken up far too much space in my mind today, and I was determined to evict him once and for all.

The gym was nearly empty, which was just how I liked it. I plugged in my headphones, scrolled through my playlist, and landed on something fast and heavy. The bass pumped through my ears as I hopped onto the treadmill, setting it to a brisk run.

Focus, Lennox. Just run. Breathe.

With each pounding step, I told myself I was running away from him—away from the memories, the confusion, the ache I didn't want to admit I felt.

But the harder I ran, the more he circled back.

His face, his smile, his kisses, the way he'd look at me like I was the only person in the room.

His hands on my skin, his sliding in and out.

I pushed the speed higher, willing myself to forget.

Thirty minutes later, my legs were burning, and my shirt clung to me, drenched in sweat.

I slowed the treadmill to a walk, panting as I stared at my reflection in the floor-to-ceiling mirrors.

My face was flushed, my hair frizzed at the edges, but my mind was no clearer.

If anything, the memories of Omir had intensified, clinging to me like a second skin.

God, I need to get him out of my system.

I grabbed a towel from the rack, wiped my face, and headed back upstairs.

The silence of my apartment felt deafening as I kicked off my sneakers and peeled off my workout clothes.

I tossed them into the hamper and made my way to the bathroom, turning the shower dial all the way to hot.

Steam quickly filled the room, curling around the edges of the mirror as I stepped under the spray.

The water scalded my skin, but it wasn't enough to drown out the thoughts invading my mind.

My hands moved to lather soap across my body, and before I could stop myself, I was thinking about him again.

His hands gripping my hips, his mouth trailing heat down my spine, the way he'd growl my name when he was on the brink of losing control.

My breath hitched as my hand slid lower, remembering the nights we'd spent tangled in his sheets. Nights where the world outside didn't matter, where it was just us, raw and unfiltered. My fingers moved instinctively, and for a fleeting moment, I let myself sink into the memory of him.

But then I stopped, my hand frozen mid-motion. "What the hell are you doing, Lennox?" I muttered under my breath, yanking it away like it had betrayed me.

I shut off the water and stepped out, grabbing a towel to wrap around me. The ache inside me wasn't going anywhere, and I knew exactly what—or who—could fix it. With a frustrated sigh, I reached for my phone and dialed Justin's number.

The line rang a few times before his deep voice answered. "Yo, what's up?"

"Hey," I said, trying to sound casual. "What are you doing tonight?"

There was a pause. "Uh, not much. What's up?"

I rolled my eyes, though he couldn't see it. "I was thinking maybe you could come

over. You know, we could spend some time together.”

“Spend some time together, huh?” He chuckled. “You mean you want me to come over and blow your back out.”

I smirked, despite myself. “Don’t flatter yourself. But if you’re free, I could use some company.”

Justin sighed, and I could already tell where this was going. “Look, Lennox, I told you the last time I was over there that I was done. You hit me up when you’re bored or horny, and I’m supposed to just drop everything and come running? I’m not doing that shit anymore.”

I blinked, caught off guard by his sudden change of tone. “I didn’t realize you had a problem with it,” I said, my voice cooler now.

“Yeah, well, I do. I want more than just a booty call, Lennox. I want all of you. But you’ve made it clear you’re not interested in anything serious, so I’m done.”

“Wow.” I scoffed.

I stared at the phone in my hand as the line went dead and felt a pang of something I didn’t want to name.

Frustration? Disappointment? Loneliness?

All of the above? I tossed the phone onto my bed and flopped down beside it, staring at the ceiling.

Now, I was left with nothing but my thoughts. And Omir was one of them.

OMIR

The night started like any other. The jazz club was alive with music, laughter, and the clinking of glasses.

The scent of bourbon and fried appetizers hung in the air, and the band was deep into their second set, the saxophone player wailing out a mournful tune that spoke to something deep in my soul.

I was stationed at the bar, keeping an eye on the flow of things. It was my ritual—make my rounds, check in with the staff, and settle into a spot where I could see and feel the pulse of the night. Business was booming, and the crowd was just the way I liked it: lively but not rowdy.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, pulling me from the rhythm of the room. It was O'Shea. I sighed, debating whether to answer. He'd been a pain in my ass lately with his bullshit baby mama drama and money issues.

"Yo, what's up?" I said, keeping my voice low enough not to disturb the patrons around me.

"Bro, I need to talk to you," he said, his voice urgent. "I'm bouta be outside the club. In the back."

"O—"

"Just come out, bro."

Something in his tone stopped me from brushing him off.

I nodded at the bartender to hold things down and headed for the back entrance.

The moment I stepped outside, I saw him pacing by the dumpsters, looking over his shoulder like someone was after him.

He was jittery, his usual cool, cocky demeanor replaced by something bordering on panic.

“What’s going on?” I asked, crossing my arms.

O’Shea stopped pacing and turned to me, his face tight. “I need some money, O. Like, right fucking now.”

“Are you fucking serious?” I shook my head. “We’ve had this conversation a million times. I’m not your bank. You gotta stop putting yourself in these situations.”

“This ain’t like the other times, man,” he said, his voice rising. “These niggas I owe? They’re serious. If I don’t pay up, they’re coming for me. I told ’em to meet me here.”

I stared at him, frustration boiling in my chest. “How much?”

“Eight grand,” he muttered, avoiding my eyes.

“Eight gr. . .” I nearly shouted. “Are you out of your fucking mind?”

“Omir—”

Before I could respond, the sound of raised voices cut through the alley. Two men

rounded the corner, their postures tense, their eyes locked on O'Shea.

"This him?" one of them said, nodding toward my brother.

O'Shea stepped back, his hands up. "Look, I just need a little more time?—"

"Time's up," the other man growled, pulling a gun from his waistband.

"Hey, hey, hold the fuck up!" I hollered. "Whatever this is, we can figure it out without all the extra shit. This is my place of business, and I'm not about to let this go down here."

The man with the gun sneered. "Stay out of this, big man. Your brother owes Redd."

"I'll pay," I said, my voice steady. "Just let me go inside?—"

"Nah. Too easy." The gun went off, the sound deafening in the tight alley. My ears rang as I turned to see O'Shea clutching his stomach, blood pouring between his fingers.

"No!" I yelled, catching him as he fell.

The men bolted, disappearing into the night, and I didn't have the presence of mind to chase after them. My focus was on my brother, his face pale, his breathing shallow.

"Stay with me," I said, pressing my hands over the wound while also fumbling for my cell phone.

"O. . ." His voice was weak, his eyes glassy.

"Hang on," I choked out as the line picked up. "I need a fucking ambulance!" But I

could feel it slipping away, the life draining from him.

The alley filled with the sound of sirens, but it was too late. By the time the paramedics arrived, my brother was gone. I sat there, covered in his blood, the weight of everything crashing down on me. No matter how much trouble he got into, he was still my brother. And I'd failed him.

The rest of the night passed in a blur. I shut down the club, called my father, hit up Cindy, who broke down screaming crying about Juice growing up without a father. And, after all that shit, the cops questioned me nonstop.

Anya showed up, her face full of worry. But none of it registered. All I could see was O'Shea's lifeless body, his blood staining the pavement. Anya stood across from me, her arms crossed, her face set in an expression I couldn't quite place—somewhere between worry and frustration.

I leaned against the bar, a glass of whiskey in my hand. I hadn't taken a sip. My mind was a mess of grief, anger, and guilt. O'Shea's blood still felt warm on my hands, even though it was long washed away.

Anya broke the silence. "Omir, you've been sitting here for hours. Talk to me."

I exhaled sharply, staring into the amber liquid in my glass. "What do you want me to say, Anya?"

She stepped closer, her voice softer now. "I want you to let me in. You just lost your brother, and you're shutting me out like I'm a stranger."

"You don't understand," I said, my voice low, almost a growl. "You can't understand."

Her jaw tightened. “Try me.”

I finally looked at her, my eyes heavy with everything I didn’t want to say.

“You weren’t there. You didn’t see him lying in that alley, bleeding out because of some bullshit I don’t even know the full story on.

You didn’t hear him take his last breath while I—” My voice cracked, and I turned away, unable to finish.

Anya moved closer, her hand reaching for mine, but I pulled away. “Baby, you can’t blame yourself for what happened.”

“Don’t tell me what I can and can’t fucking feel,” I snapped, my voice sharper than I intended.

Her eyes widened in shock before narrowing in anger. “Excuse me?”

I ran a hand over my face, regretting the tone but unable to back down. “You keep asking me to talk, to explain, but what do you want me to say? That I failed him? That I couldn’t save him? That maybe if I’d been a better brother, he wouldn’t have been in that alley in the first place?”

“Stop it!” she said, her voice trembling. “You’re not responsible for your brother’s choices. He made them, not you.”

I laughed bitterly, shaking my head. “You don’t get it, Anya. You’ve got your perfect family, your perfect life. You don’t know what it’s like to carry the weight of someone else’s fuck ups, to feel like no matter what you do, it never helped.”

Her face reddened, her hands trembling at her sides. “How dare you?” she hissed.

“Just stop asking questions I can’t fucking answer!” I yelled, my voice echoing in the empty space.

The slap came out of nowhere, sharp and stinging against my cheek. For a moment, neither of us moved. The air between us was thick with tension, her chest heaving with emotion, her eyes glistening with unshed tears.

She stepped back, her voice breaking. “I get it. You’re hurting.

But that doesn’t give you the right to treat me like this.

” She wiped at her face, shaking her head.

She turned and stormed out of the club, the door slamming behind her.

I stood there in the heavy silence, the faint echo of her footsteps fading into the night.

I dropped into one of the barstools, the whiskey glass still untouched in front of me.

My cheek stung where her hand had connected, but it was nothing compared to the ache in my chest. Anya was right.

I was pushing her away. But how could I give her what she needed when I didn’t even know how to fix myself?

For the first time in years, I didn’t know how to hold it all together.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:15 am

LENNOX

The sound of my favorite playlist streamed softly from the speaker on my vanity as I leaned forward to put the finishing touches on my makeup.

A swipe of crimson lipstick, a dab of gloss in the center for that pop—it was perfect.

Tonight, I was determined to look and feel my best. I adjusted the straps of my sleek black dress and smoothed the fabric over my hips.

“This is going to be a great night,” I said aloud to myself, forcing conviction into my voice as I slipped on my heels.

I was determined to make this date work, even if my reasons for accepting it were.

. . selfish. Jevon had been persistent, polite, and attentive—everything a woman should want.

And yet, the thought of tonight wasn’t thrilling because of him.

It was thrilling because it was a chance to shove my thoughts of Omir aside.

He’d been haunting me. It was like the universe was trying to rub salt in a wound I refused to acknowledge was even there.

I grabbed my clutch and coat, glancing at my reflection one last time in the hallway mirror before heading for the door. But as I reached for the knob, the sound of

breaking news from my muted TV stopped me.

I turned back, remote in hand, and increased the volume. The image on the screen was Omir's jazz club, instantly recognizable with its glowing marquee and classic design. The Velvet Note. Yellow police tape cordoned off the entrance, and an all-too-familiar pit formed in my stomach.

. . . last night's tragic shooting at the popular jazz club in Arbor Hills," the reporter was saying, her tone somber. "The victim has been identified as twenty-nine-year-old O'Shea Harper, the younger brother of the club's owner. The investigation is ongoing, and the motive remains unclear. . ."

I gasped, my hand flying to my chest. "Oh my God," I murmured, staring at the screen. I stood frozen, the world tilting just slightly. My heart ached for Omir, knowing how much he must be hurting. My thoughts raced. Should I reach out? Would he even want to hear from me?

"This isn't your business, Lennox," I muttered to myself, shaking my head. "You wanted to keep things casual. You walked away."

Still, I couldn't shake the image of Omir's face from my mind. Before I could decide, my phone buzzed, and Jevon's name lit up the screen. I answered with a shaky, "Hello?"

"I'm downstairs," he said warmly. "Take your time. No rush."

I forced a smile he couldn't see. "Thanks. I'll be right down."

After hanging up, I hesitated, glancing back at the TV. The reporter was still detailing the aftermath of the shooting, but I couldn't make myself listen anymore. Instead, I pulled up Sherelle's number and fired off a quick text: Is everything okay with Omir?

Her response came almost immediately: Why don't you reach out to him yourself and stop being childish?

I groaned, clutching my phone. "Thanks, Sherelle. Really helpful," I muttered sarcastically. But she wasn't wrong.

I grabbed my coat, stuffing my phone into my clutch as I left my apartment and stepped into the brisk night air. Jevon's Mercedes was parked just outside, its headlights glowing warmly. He stepped out as I approached, a gentlemanly move that made me smile despite myself.

"You look stunning," he said, his eyes wide with appreciation.

"Thank you," I replied, forcing warmth into my voice. "You clean up nicely too." I mean, he did look good in his button down and slacks.

He grinned, opening the passenger door for me. "Shall we?"

During dinner, we talked about everything from work to music to favorite movies. But I only half-listened. My mind was back on Omir, on the shooting, on the pain that must be consuming him. I needed something to take my mind off everything, so I reluctantly invited Jevon back to my place.

We stumbled into my apartment, his hands gripping my waist as his lips moved fervently against mine. My clutch dropped to the floor, forgotten, and my coat slipped from my shoulders. His cologne filled my senses, warm and spicy, but I couldn't lose myself in it. Not really.

I wanted to. God, I wanted to feel something—anything—that wasn't this dull ache in my chest. Jevon trailed kisses along my jawline and whispered, "You're so beautiful, Lennox. I've wanted this for so fucking long."

I responded with a shallow sigh, running my fingers over his head and pulling him closer. Maybe if I just let myself go, I'd forget. Maybe if I gave into this, I'd stop feeling so empty.

We made our way to the couch, and Jevon gently lowered me onto the cushions.

His lips found mine again, his hands exploring the curve of my waist. I tried to focus on the moment, on him, on the way his hands felt.

But it wasn't enough. And then it hit me like a brick wall. I didn't want this. I didn't want him.

"Wait," I said, my voice shaky as I pushed against his chest.

He pulled back slightly, his brow furrowed. "What's wrong?"

"I—I can't," I stammered, sitting up and pulling my dress back into place. "I thought I could, but. . . I can't do this."

His confusion quickly shifted to irritation. "Lennox, we've been dancing around this for months. You said yes to tonight. You invited me in. And now you're just. . . stopping?"

"It's not about you," I said, my voice strained. "You're amazing. Really. I just. . . I'm not in the right headspace for this."

He scoffed, running a hand through his hair.

"Not in the right headspace? So what was tonight? A distraction from something else? Someone else?" His words stung because they were true.

I looked away, unable to meet his eyes. Jevon stood, grabbing his coat from the floor.

“You know, Lennox, I thought you were different. But you’re just as closed off as everyone says you are. ”

“That’s not fair,” I shot back, standing as well. “I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

“Yeah, well, it did.” He opened the door, his voice cold. “Good night.”

The door slammed shut behind him, leaving me alone in the silence of my apartment. I stood there for a moment, my heart pounding in my chest, anger and guilt warring inside me.

I sank, sighing as I reached for my phone to distract myself, but it buzzed in my hand before I could open anything. My brother’s name lit up the screen.

“Yes, Lawrence?” I said, trying to sound normal.

There was a long pause before he finally spoke. “Len. . .” His voice was tight, strained.

My stomach dropped. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s Dad,” he said, his voice breaking. “He collapsed tonight. We’re all at the hospital.”

The phone nearly slipped from my hand as his words registered. “What? Oh my God. Is-is he. . . is he okay?”

“They’re doing everything they can,” Derrick said. “But it’s bad, Lennox. You need to come home.”

“I’ll be right there,” I said immediately, my voice trembling. “I’ll book the first flight out.”

Tears welled in my eyes as I whispered into the empty room, “What else can go wrong?” I didn’t have an answer. Only a gnawing sense of regret and the urgent need to be with my family.

OMIR

The gym was empty when I walked in, just the way I liked it.

The scent of rubber mats and faintly lingering sweat hung in the air as I set my bag down in the corner.

It was early, maybe too early for anyone else to be up, but sleep hadn't come easy since O'Shea's death.

My little brother was gone, and no amount of lifting, running, or punching a heavy bag would bring him back.

I wrapped my hands in the worn, black boxing wraps and took a deep breath. The punching bag swung lightly on its chain in front of me, taunting me, daring me to let it all out. I squared my shoulders and threw the first punch.

One. Two. Hook. Uppercut.

The rhythm was familiar, but the weight in my chest didn't lighten. I could still see his face—O'Shea, smirking, asking me for advice he never took. I could hear his laugh. I could hear the gunshot. I punched harder, sweat dripping down my face, my breaths coming fast.

“O. . .” I whispered, my voice breaking as I drove my fists into the bag. The anger, the guilt, the loss—it all crashed over me like a tidal wave.

By the time I finished, my hands were shaking. I slumped onto a bench, staring at the floor, trying to catch my breath. My phone buzzed on the bench next to me, and I hesitated before picking it up. It was Anya.

I wiped my face with a towel and answered. “Hey.”

“You’re at the gym again?” she asked, her voice soft, careful.

“Yeah,” I replied, keeping my tone short.

“Omir. . .” She sighed. “You can’t keep doing this. You have businesses to run. I mean, I’ve been stepping in but?—”

“Better than sitting around doing nothing,” I muttered, tossing the towel aside.

“Look,” she said, her voice quieter now. “I know you’re hurting. I’m trying to help, but you keep shutting me out. I don’t know how much more of this I can take.”

I rubbed my temples, guilt settling in alongside the anger. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I just. . . I don’t know how to deal with this shit, Anya.”

“Then let me help you,” she pleaded. “We’re supposed to be a team, Omir. You can’t keep pushing me away.”

“I know,” I said, though my chest felt tight. “I’ll do better. I promise.” But even as I said the words, I wasn’t sure I believed them.

Later that day, I sat in my office at home, staring at the stacks of mail on my desk. Bills, vendor contracts, event plans—things that used to excite me but now felt like weights dragging me down. The bell ringing pulled an exhausted breath from me as I went to answer the door.

Sherelle stepped inside, her expression a mix of concern and determination. “Hey,” she said, flashing a sympathetic smile.

“What’s up?” I asked, closing the door and leaning against the door frame.

She crossed her arms and gave me a pointed look. “What’s up is that you look like hell, and I’m worried about you.”

“I’m good,” I said automatically.

“No, you’re not,” she shot back. “Don’t give me that ‘I’m good’ bullshit. I can tell you’re barely sleeping, and I stopped by the restaurant. Anya is doing her best.”

I sighed, running a hand over my face. “What do you want me to say, Relle? That I’m fucked up?”

Her expression softened, and her shoulders rose and fell. “Did you know Lennox’s dad passed away?”

The air seemed to leave the room. I looked up sharply. “What?”

“It happened a couple of days ago,” she said gently. “I thought you should know.”

“Damn. How is she?” I asked, my voice quieter now.

“She’s managing,” Sherelle said. “You know how she is—strong on the outside, but this is tearing her up. Losing a parent isn’t easy.” I nodded, my chest tightening. “You should reach out,” Sherelle added.

I shook my head. “She doesn’t want to hear from me.”

“You don’t know that,” Sherelle said. “Maybe she does. Just think about it, O. Life’s too short to leave things unsaid.”

After she left, I sat in silence for a long time in the living room. I sat there for what felt like an eternity, staring at the black screen of my phone. I rubbed my temples, the ache in my chest impossible to ignore.

I picked up my phone and opened Instagram, pulling up Lennox’s profile. Before I could stop myself, I opened the message box and started typing.

Hey, how are you?

I stared at the words for a moment, debating whether to hit send. It was simple enough, but I knew the weight behind it. It wasn’t just a casual check-in. It was everything I hadn’t said, everything I’d avoided for over a year.

I exhaled and pressed send before I could change my mind. Almost immediately, my phone buzzed. A notification appeared at the top of the screen.

TheeLennoxAnderson: Hey, how are you?

I froze, staring at the words, my mind racing. She had sent the exact same message. At the exact same time.

It felt like the universe had paused for a moment, aligning in a way I didn’t understand. My heart pounded in my chest as I reread her message, wondering if she was thinking the same shit I was.

LENNOX

A few days ago, my world shattered. I could still hear the faint sound of my heels clicking against the airport floor, echoing like the ticking of a bomb. Every minute felt like a lifetime as I rushed through the terminal, phone clutched tightly in my hand, silently willing time to move faster.

The flight was a blur, my mind spiraling with panic and prayers. By the time I landed and raced into the hospital, the sterile smell of disinfectant hit me like a wall. I was met with my sister's tear-streaked face in the waiting room.

"He's gone," she whispered, her voice cracking.

"No," I whispered back, shaking my head as if that one word could change everything. "No, no, no?—"

But it didn't. The weight of reality slammed into me as I walked into the room.

My mother sat by the bed, clutching his lifeless hand, her cries muffled but piercing.

My brother stood by the window, his fists clenched, his chest heaving with silent sobs.

My sister sat in a chair, her arms wrapped protectively around her pregnant belly, tears streaming down her face.

And there he was. My father. The strongest man I'd ever known, now so still. I

crumbled. Sobs wracked my body as I collapsed into my mother's arms. "Daddy, no. Please, no."

The rest of that night was a haze of emotions, waves of grief that left no space for anything else. We clung to each other in that cold, sterile room, our pain a shared, unspoken bond.

Now, days later, I sat curled up on the couch in my parents' living room, staring blankly at the wall. The house felt too quiet, even with family bustling around trying to prepare for the funeral. It was as if the walls themselves mourned his absence.

In my lap was my phone, open to Instagram. The message Omir and I had sent each other was still there, unanswered.

ODaGoat: Hey, how are you?

We'd sent the same words at the same time, as if the universe had pressed "send" for us both.

I hadn't responded. I wasn't even sure why I'd sent it in the first place. Maybe it was the loneliness. Maybe it was the grief. Or maybe it was just him—Omira—pulling at my mind the way he always seemed to. But what could I even say to him now? "I'm broken"? "I think I miss you"?

I sighed, closing my eyes as I leaned back into the couch. My father's voice echoed in my mind, always encouraging, always steady. He'd tell me to face what I was feeling, to stop running from it.

"Lenny?" My mother's voice broke through my thoughts. I opened my eyes to find her standing in the doorway, her face weary but gentle. "Sherelle is in the kitchen waiting for you."

I nodded, placing my phone face-down on the cushion beside me before getting up and heading to the kitchen. Sherelle was standing at the counter, sipping a glass of water. Her face softened when she saw me.

“Hey, girl.”

“Hey,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

She pulled me into a hug, her warmth breaking through the numbness I’d been wrapped in. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m. . . managing,” I said, though the weight of the word felt like a lie.

Sherelle guided me to sit at the small kitchen table, her hands still holding mine. “I’m so sorry, Lennox. Your dad was such a good man. This is so unfair.”

I nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat. “It still doesn’t feel real. One minute he was fine, and the next. . .” My voice cracked, and I looked away, blinking back tears.

Sherelle gave my hand a reassuring squeeze. “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

I shook my head. “No, it’s fine. I just. . . I don’t know how I’m supposed to get through this.”

“You will,” she said firmly. “You’re one of the strongest people I know. And you’ve got your family. And me.” I managed a small, grateful smile. Sherelle leaned back slightly, studying me. “So. . . did you talk to Omir yet?”

I blinked, caught off guard. “What?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Don’t play dumb. Has he reached out, or have you?”

I sighed, leaning back in my chair. “I only asked him how he was, and surprisingly, he asked me the same. At the same exact time.

“Soulmates.”

“Relle, please,” I said, exasperated. “It’s complicated. And with everything going on with my dad, I just?—”

“You’re scared,” she said, her tone soft but pointed. I opened my mouth to argue but closed it again. She wasn’t wrong. “Look,” Sherelle said, leaning forward. “I’m not saying you need to spill your heart out to him. Just give your condolences and catch up. What’s the harm?”

The house had quieted down. My siblings and their families had left, and my mom had finally gone to bed, exhausted but trying her best to keep it together.

I was alone on the couch again, the dim glow of a single lamp casting long shadows across the room.

The silence felt heavier now, pressing down on me, amplifying every stray thought and emotion.

My phone sat on the coffee table, face-up, taunting me with its stillness. I’d been avoiding it all evening, knowing exactly what I’d see if I picked it up—the unread message from Omir waiting in my Instagram DMs.

I reached for the glass of wine I’d poured hours ago, now warm and forgotten. As I took a sip, my gaze flicked to the phone again.

“Just do it, Lennox,” I muttered to myself.

I set the glass down, took a deep breath, and grabbed the phone. My heart pounded as I opened the app and navigated to the messages. His words stared back at me:

ODaGoat: Hey, how are you?

Simple, yet loaded.

My fingers hovered over the keyboard, my mind racing.

What could I even say? I wasn't okay. My father was gone.

I felt like a stranger in my own life, surrounded by success but utterly alone.

And then there was him. Omir. The one person who had a way of stirring emotions in me that I couldn't seem to control.

I typed slowly, hesitantly.

I'm... hurting. My condolences, by the way.

I stared at the words for a long moment before hitting send. My chest felt tight, like I'd just given away a piece of myself. Almost immediately, the typing bubbles appeared, and my pulse quickened.

Same here. I'm fucked up. And thanks. My condolences as well. Truly. That's a pain I wouldn't wish on anyone.

My eyes blurred as I read his response. It was the first time he'd said it outright, admitted that he was struggling. The vulnerability in his words struck me. There was

a pause, and then another message appeared.

Can I see you?

I sucked in a sharp breath, staring at the screen. My first instinct was to say no, to put up the wall I'd perfected over the years. But something stopped me. Maybe it was the rawness of his message, or maybe it was the fact that I was so damn tired of running from how I felt.

Still, I hesitated. My fingers hovered over the keyboard as doubts crept in. What would this accomplish? Would seeing him make things better or worse?

Finally, I typed back.

When?

The message sent, and I let out a shaky breath.

There was no turning back now. As I set the phone down, a mix of anxiety and anticipation coursed through me.

I didn't know what tomorrow would bring, but for the first time in a long while, I felt something other than numbness.

It wasn't peace—not yet—but it was something.

And maybe, just maybe, that was enough for now.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:15 am

OMIR

O 'Shea's laugh echoed in the foggy recesses of my mind, sharp and unfiltered, the way it used to be when we were younger. He was sitting across from me in Pop's living room with a blunt between his fingers.

"You got life all fucked up, O," I said, and he shook his head, the smoke curling around his face. "You think life waits for you to figure it out. It doesn't."

He frowned, leaning back against the couch. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you're out here acting like you've got all the time in the world to make shit right. You've got a son now. It's time to get your shit together, bro. For real."

He opened my mouth to speak again, but the smoke thickened, and his figure began to fade.

"O!" I called out, but the only response was the sound of my own alarm blaring in the background.

I woke up drenched in sweat, my heart racing. The room was dim, the late morning sun barely filtering through the curtains. I blinked a few times, trying to steady my breathing, when I noticed Anya sitting up in bed, staring at me.

"Bad dream?" she asked softly, her voice laced with concern.

I rubbed my face and nodded. "Yeah. . . something like that."

She reached out to touch my arm. “Do you want to talk about it?”

I shook my head. “Nah.”

She sighed and moved closer, her hands sliding up my chest. “Babe, everything is going to be alright.”

Her words were sincere, but they didn’t hit the way they should have. Instead, they felt like an echo, distant and hollow. “I know,” I said, forcing a small smile. “I’m sorry for how I’ve been acting. I’ve been pushing you away, and that shit ain’t fair. I’ll make it up to you.”

Anya climbed onto my lap, her warm body pressing against mine as she cupped my face in her hands. “You better,” she said with a teasing smirk before leaning in to kiss me.

Her lips were soft, familiar, but as her kisses deepened and her breathy moans filled the room, my mind drifted to Lennox. Anya tugged at my shirt, trying to pull me closer, but I gently pulled back.

“Not. . . not right now,” I murmured.

Her brows knitted together in confusion. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m just. . . not in the right headspace. It’s not you, baby. I swear.”

She searched my eyes for a moment before nodding.

I got up and headed to the shower, the hot water pounding against my skin as I tried to clear my head.

But no matter how hard I tried, my thoughts kept circling back to Lennox.

The message we'd exchanged the night before when she gave me her parents' address.

The fact that I was about to see her for the first time in over a year.

When I stepped out of the shower, Anya was still in bed, scrolling through her phone. "You heading to the club?" she asked, barely glancing up.

"Not right now," I said, pulling on a pair of jeans and a black T-shirt. "I've got something else to take care of." She raised an eyebrow but didn't press further.

As I walked out the door, a strange mix of anticipation and anxiety settled in my chest. I didn't know what this meeting with Lennox would bring, but one thing was certain: It was time to face the past.

When I pulled up to Lennox's parents' house, the first thing I saw was her sitting on the front porch, waiting. Her arms were wrapped around her knees, her head slightly tilted as the breeze tousled her hair. The moment my car came to a stop, her eyes lifted to meet mine.

And just like that, I was stuck.

She was fucking beautiful in an oversized knitted sweater, leggings, and boots, although something was different.

There was a weight in her expression that wasn't there before, a heaviness that mirrored my own.

Still, she was breathtaking, and for a moment, I couldn't bring myself to get out of

the car.

I just sat there, gripping the steering wheel, trying to steady my pulse.

Finally, I opened the door and stepped out. The crunch of gravel under my Timbs seemed to echo in the stillness of the moment. As I walked toward her, she stood, her body tense but her gaze unwavering.

We didn't say a word at first. We didn't need to.

Our eyes locked, and it was like stepping back in time.

The same intensity that had always existed between us was still there, unspoken but undeniable.

I stopped at the bottom of the porch steps, unsure if I should climb them or keep my distance.

She made the decision for me, stepping aside and gesturing for me to sit.

I climbed the steps and sat beside her, close enough to feel her presence but not enough to cross an unspoken boundary. For a while, we just sat in silence, the weight of our losses settling between us. "How are you holding up?" I finally asked, my voice low.

She let out a soft, bitter laugh. "I don't know if I am. Some days feel normal, and then other days, it hits me out of nowhere. Like today. I came out here to clear my head, but. . ." She trailed off, shaking her head.

I nodded. "I get that. It's the same for me. It's like this permanent ache I can't shake. Some days I'm fine, but then something reminds me of him, and it's like I'm right

back at the beginning.”

She turned her head toward me, her eyes searching mine. “Have they caught the people who did it?”

“Not yet,” I said, my jaw tightening. “The investigation’s still ongoing, even with me turning over the security tapes. I’ve been pressing the detectives, but there’s only so much they can tell me. It’s frustrating as fuck.”

“I’m sorry,” she said softly. Her hand twitched like she wanted to reach for mine but stopped herself.

“Thanks,” I said, my voice rougher than I intended.

For a while, we just sat there, lost in our own thoughts, before she spoke again. “How’s work? The club?”

“Considering I took a step back after all this shit, business is still good,” I said, leaning back against the porch railing. “I opened a restaurant not too long ago. It’s good too. How’s everything with you?”

She nodded. “I’ve been the same with work. It’s all I focus on most days. The new office is thriving, and yeah, life is. . . is good. Chicago has been good to me.”

“That’s great, Lennox. You deserve it.”

She smiled faintly, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Thanks.” The conversation lulled for a moment before she glanced at me. “So. . . you’re getting married?”

There it was. The question I’d been expecting but dreading. I nodded. “Yeah. Anya and I are tying the knot next month.”

She stared at me, her expression unreadable. “You love her?”

“I do,” I said, the words steady but not as certain as they should’ve been.

Lennox nodded slowly, her gaze dropping to her lap. “That’s good. I’m happy for you, Omir.”

I looked at her, and for a moment, I thought she was going to say something else. Her lips parted, but then she pressed them together, shaking her head slightly like she’d decided against it.

“I appreciate it,” I said quietly.

She stood, brushing her hands on her leggings. “It was nice to see you. I mean that. I wish you the best with. . . everything.”

I stood too, unable to ignore the ache in my chest. “You too, Lennox.”

We hugged, and it wasn’t a casual hug. It was deep, lingering, and charged with everything we weren’t saying. I could feel her trembling slightly in my arms, and I tightened my hold, wishing I could take away her pain—and maybe mine too.

When we finally pulled apart, the front door creaked open, and an older woman stepped out. “Lenny, would you like to invite your friend inside?” she asked warmly, her face lighting.

“Omira, Mrs. Anderson.” I greeted her with a polite nod and a handshake. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you. You’re staying for lunch, right?” she asked, her tone leaving no room for argument.

“Oh, he’s not staying.” Lennox cut in quickly, her voice a little higher than usual.

“Nonsense,” her mother said, waving her off. “Son, do you know your way around the kitchen?”

Lennox shot me a look, her expression a mix of annoyance and something else I couldn’t quite place. “I do,” I said, surprising even myself. “I have a passion for cooking and good food in general.”

“Well, then, I’ll meet you in the kitchen.” Mrs. Anderson beamed and disappeared back inside, leaving Lennox and me standing on the porch.

She crossed her arms, giving me a pointed look. “You didn’t have to say yes.”

I shrugged, a small smirk tugging at my lips. “Your mom’s hard to say no to.”

She huffed but didn’t argue, turning and walking inside. I followed her, wondering how the hell I’d ended up here—and low-key glad I had.

LENNOX

I t had taken everything in me to congratulate Omir on being engaged. Every polite word that left my lips felt forced, like my heart was working against me. Deep down, I didn't mean it—not entirely. Seeing him again stirred up feelings I'd worked so hard to bury.

It wasn't just the lingering chemistry or the way he looked at me, though that didn't help. It was everything—the weight of our brief history, the memories of what could've been, and the undeniable pull that always seemed to draw us back together, no matter how much time passed.

I couldn't deny it. Seeing him on the porch, his presence filling the house like he belonged there, made me ache in a way I didn't want to admit.

The way he hugged me earlier, it lingered.

His touch, his scent, his quiet intensity, it all lingered.

But none of that mattered. He was engaged now, and I had no place in his life beyond polite pleasantries and distant memories. That was what I told myself, anyway.

From my spot at the dining room table, I could hear him laughing with my mother in the kitchen.

The sound was warm, genuine, like they'd known each other for years instead of a couple of hours.

I turned slightly, catching a glimpse of them through the doorway.

Omair was leaning casually against the counter, a dishtowel slung over his shoulder, while my mom stood beside him, stirring something in a pot.

“You cook like this often?” Mom teased, nudging him with her elbow.

“Not as much as I’d like to anymore,” he admitted, grinning. “But I can hold my own in the kitchen.”

“Well, we’ll see about that,” she said, chuckling. “You better not be all talk.”

They both laughed, and for a second, I couldn’t take my eyes off him. He looked so at ease, so comfortable. It was unsettling—how natural he seemed here, in this space that was supposed to be mine, surrounded by the people who knew me best.

“Lennox.”

Lorna’s voice snapped me out of my thoughts. I turned to find her standing behind me, arms crossed, and one eyebrow raised.

“What?” I asked, blinking.

She tilted her head toward the hallway. “Come here for a second.” I hesitated, glancing back at the kitchen, before following her out of the room.

Once we were in the hallway, she crossed her arms again and gave me a pointed look.

“Okay, who is the fine ass man in the kitchen with Mom? Because I know he’s not just some random friend. ”

I sighed, leaning against the wall. “His name is Omir. He’s. . . someone I used to know.”

Her brow furrowed. “Used to know? Like, how?”

“Like. . . we were involved,” I admitted, keeping my voice low. “It was a while ago.”

“Uh-huh,” she said, her tone skeptical. “And now he’s just randomly here, making jokes with Mom and helping with lunch?”

“It’s not like that,” I said quickly. “I ran into him recently, and we’re just catching up. That’s all.”

“Catching up?” she repeated, raising an eyebrow. “Lennox, the way you were watching him. . .”

“I wasn’t watching him,” I cut in, heat rising to my cheeks.

She smirked. “You were definitely watching him. Don’t even try to deny it.”

I rolled my eyes. “It doesn’t matter. He’s engaged. End of story.”

Her expression softened slightly. “And how do you feel about that?”

“Why does it matter?” I shot back, more defensive than I intended.

“Because you’re my sister,” she said simply. “And I can tell this isn’t just some random reunion for you. There’s history here—something unresolved.”

I looked away, unable to meet her gaze. “It doesn’t matter,” I repeated.

She sighed, placing a hand on my shoulder. “Okay. But if you ever want to talk about it . . .”

“I’m fine,” I said quickly.

She studied me for a moment before nodding. “Alright. Just remember what I said.”

I nodded, and she walked away, leaving me alone in the hallway.

As I stood there, I felt the weight of everything pressing down on me—my father’s death, Omir’s presence, the memories I couldn’t shake. I made my way back to the dining room and sank onto the couch, my thoughts spinning. Despite my best efforts to suppress them, they kept circling back to him.

I didn’t know how to describe what I felt—regret, longing, frustration. Maybe all three. But one thing was clear: Omir still had a hold on me, whether I wanted to admit it or not. And the worst part? I wasn’t sure I wanted to let it go.

Lunch was warm and inviting, a sharp contrast to the grief that had cloaked the house for days.

The smell of roasted chicken, collard greens, mac and cheese, and cornbread filled the air, mingling with the sound of soft jazz playing in the background—a choice my mom had made without realizing how much it would remind me of Omir’s club.

She set the last dish on the table, smiling at Omir as she handed him a serving spoon. “Thank you so much for assisting, Omir. You make a great sous chef.”

“I’m glad I could help out,” Omir said, flashing that signature smile that had always disarmed me. “Everything smells amazing.”

“I’m sure she didn’t let you see the ingredients to the baked mac though.” I chimed in.

“You know she didn’t,” Lorna quipped, carrying a bowl of sweet potatoes to the table. “She’s taking that to her grave.”

“Exactly.” Mom agreed with a knowing smile. “Now everyone, have a seat.”

Lorna sat down beside me, throwing me a subtle glance as if to remind me of our earlier conversation. I ignored her and focused on my plate instead.

As the meal went on, conversation flowed easily. My mom asked Omir about his businesses, nodding along as he talked about the expansion of his jazz club, the new restaurant, and. . . his fiancée.

“That’s impressive,” my mom said, genuinely impressed. “Owning and managing two businesses and planning a wedding? You must never sleep.”

“Not as much as I should,” Omir admitted. “But it’s worth it. I love what I do.”

“And you’re getting married soon,” Lorna, not-so-subtly watching me, spoke. “You’re just checking all the boxes, huh?”

Omira gave a small smile, his expression unreadable. “It’s been a busy year, that’s for sure.”

The table grew quiet for a moment, and I could feel the tension creeping in. My mom broke it by turning to Omir. “So, how do you and Lennox know each other again?”

I froze, feeling the weight of her question. Omir, however, didn’t miss a beat. “Lennox used to come to my club,” he said smoothly. “We got to know each other

through a mutual friend.”

“Mutual friend,” Lorna echoed, her tone laced with amusement. I shot her a warning look, but she only smirked.

“Small world,” Mom said, oblivious to the undertone of the conversation. “Well, I’m glad you’re here today. It’s been nice having a little distraction from everything.”

Omira nodded, his expression softening. “I agree.”

After lunch, as everyone started clearing the table, I noticed Omira gathering the plates and carrying them to the kitchen. My mom playfully swatted his hand away. “You’re a guest,” she scolded. “Go relax.”

“I don’t mind helping,” Omira said with a grin.

She shook her head, smiling. “Well, aren’t you polite. Lennox could take notes.”

“Mom,” I groaned, rolling my eyes.

Omira chuckled, his gaze flicking to me for a brief moment before he carried the dishes to the sink.

After the table was cleared and the kitchen tidied, Omira grabbed his coat. I followed him to the door, feeling a mix of emotions I couldn’t quite place. As we stepped onto the porch, I turned to him. “Thanks for today. Really. It meant a lot to me and my mom.”

He nodded, slipping his hands into his pockets. “I’m glad I could be here. Your mom’s amazing, by the way. That mac and cheese? Top-tier.”

I laughed softly. "I told you." We stood there for a moment, the cold afternoon air wrapping around us. I glanced at him, unsure of what to say. "You really helped take our minds off everything today," I said quietly. "It's been. . . a lot. So, thank you again."

His eyes softened as he looked at me. Silence settled between us, heavy and charged.

For a moment, I was reminded of the times we'd spent together and of all the unspoken feelings that lingered between us.

Before I could think better of it, he stepped closer, his hand brushing against mine.

I looked up at him, and our eyes locked.

The intensity in his gaze made my breath catch and then he kissed me.

It was deep, passionate, and raw, like all the emotions we'd been suppressing came rushing to the surface.

I felt my knees weaken, my heart racing as his hands gently cupped my face.

When he finally pulled away, we were both breathless.

He stared at me for a moment, his expression a mix of longing and regret.

"I shouldn't have done that. My fault." I swallowed hard, fighting back the lump in my throat.

There was a long pause before he spoke again. "I should go."

I nodded, stepping back toward the door. "Take care, Omir."

“You too,” he said softly, turning to leave. As he walked down the steps, the front door opened behind me.

“Is your friend leaving already?” my mom asked, poking her head out. “Why don’t you invite him to stay for dessert?”

I hesitated, glancing back at Omir. He stopped, looking up at me. “I, uh. . .”

“Oh, come on,” my mom said, waving him back. “I’ve got my homemade butter pecan ice cream in the freezer.”

Omira paused at the bottom of the porch steps, glancing back at me with a conflicted expression. I held his gaze, unsure if I wanted him to stay or leave. Omir gave her a polite smile, his hands sliding into his coat pockets. “Yeah, I should get going. Thank you for lunch.”

“Well, you’re welcome anytime,” my mom said warmly. She tilted her head slightly, her perceptive eyes flickering toward me. “Safe travels, Omir.”

“Thank you,” he replied, his gaze lingering on me for a moment longer. “Stay strong, Lennox.”

“You too,” I said softly.

He turned and walked to his car, his movements deliberate but tense. The sound of his engine starting broke the silence, and I watched as his car disappeared down the street, leaving a strange emptiness in its wake.

My mom stood beside me, silent for a moment before she spoke. “You love that man, don’t you?”

I blinked, startled by her question. “What?”

She smiled knowingly, leaning against the porch railing. “I may be old, but I’m not blind. The way you two look at each other,. . . the energy I feel, . . . it reminds me of your father and me when we were younger.”

I turned to face her, my defenses rising. “Mom, it’s not like that. He just had a death in the family and has a whole life he’s building with someone else. I had my chance.”

Her brow arched slightly. “And yet, he was here today, helping me make lunch, conversing like this is where he belongs.”

I shook my head, crossing my arms over my chest. “He was just being kind. That’s all.”

“Maybe,” she said, her tone thoughtful. “But kindness doesn’t explain the way he kissed you on this porch.”

My heart jumped. “You saw that?”

She gave a small chuckle. “Lennox, I see everything. It’s a mother’s gift.”

I sighed, running a hand through my hair. “It doesn’t matter. I’m. . . I’m happy for him. I really am.”

She reached out, placing a hand on my shoulder.

“Hmm. If you say so, Lenny.” I opened my mouth to respond, but nothing came out.

“I know you’ve been through a lot,” she continued gently.

“And I know you’ve worked so hard to build this life for yourself.

But don’t let fear or pride keep you from being honest with yourself, Lennox. You deserve to be happy too.”

I nodded slowly, the lump in my throat growing larger. She gave me a soft smile and squeezed my shoulder before heading back inside, leaving me alone on the porch.

I leaned against the railing, staring out into the quiet street. Her words replayed in my mind, stirring something deep within me. Was I happy? Or was I just going through the motions, convincing myself that success and independence were enough to fill the void?

I thought about Omir—the way he looked at me, the way his kiss had reignited feelings I’d worked so hard to bury.

And yet, he had a fiancée, a life that didn’t include me.

And that was because of me and my choice to leave.

I exhaled shakily, closing my eyes. Maybe my mom was right.

Maybe I did need to be honest with myself. But what good would it do now?

As I stood there, the air brushing against my skin, I couldn’t shake the feeling that this chapter of my life wasn’t as closed as I wanted it to be.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:15 am

OMIR

Cake tasting was supposed to be one of those lighthearted moments couples looked back on and laughed about.

That was what Anya told me, her tone full of excitement as we pulled up outside this upscale-ass bakery she'd been obsessing over for the past few weeks.

She was damn near skipping in her red bottoms, her hand linked in mine like we were just two lovebirds planning the wedding of the year.

But beneath all the sugar and sparkle, I wasn't feeling it.

The moment we stepped inside, I caught the scent of vanilla, buttercream, and citrus wafting through the air.

Marble floors, glass display cases, crystal light fixtures—it was luxury, top to bottom.

Pristine. Almost too pristine. Everything in this place had been curated to perfection. Just like Anya's world.

"Omir, you're gonna love this spot," she said, smiling back at me. "Their cakes are legendary."

I gave her a small nod, letting her take the lead as we followed a hostess to a private tasting room tucked in the back.

My fingers tapped against the counter, but my thoughts weren't here.

Not in this polished space, not on fondant versus buttercream.

They were back on the porch with Lennox. Back in her eyes.

"You okay?" Anya asked, giving my hand a light squeeze as we took our seats at the tasting table. "You seem a little distracted."

I forced a smile. "I'm good. Just got a lot on my mind."

She opened her mouth like she wanted to dig deeper, but the door swung open before she could speak, and a short, bubbly pastry chef rolled in a cart stacked with cake samples like they were gold bars.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Harper, Ms. Hayes," she chirped. "I'm Sophie, and I'll be walking you through today's tasting."

Anya perked right up like somebody flipped a switch. "Perfect! Let's dive in."

Sophie rattled off flavor names, decorative concepts, frosting textures.

Anya fired off questions like she was interviewing for a Food Network special, and I nodded in the right places, even smiled once or twice, but my brain wasn't really registering anything.

Instead, I thought about lunch with Lennox's family. That day had warmth. Soul. Home.

"Omir, what do you think?" Anya's voice snapped me back.

She held out a fork with a piece of vanilla bean cake on it like it was some kind of peace offering. I leaned forward, let it hit my tongue, gave it a second. “It’s nice,” I said, swallowing.

Her brow ticked. “Nice? This is thee cake bakery in the city. Their waiting list is three months long.”

I tried to smile. “It’s delicious, baby. For real.”

She relaxed again and turned back to Sophie, diving into a whole debate about swapping raspberry for lemon. I zoned out again, letting their words fade into background noise while I sat there and thought, What the hell am I doing?

Later, we headed across town to meet her family for lunch.

Five-star spot, valet parked the car before I could even finish my sentence.

The moment we stepped in, the air changed.

No music, just soft murmurs, clinking glasses, and linen tablecloths.

Her father was already seated, phone in hand, while her mother greeted us with a lukewarm smile that never touched her eyes.

“Omir,” her mother said, extending a hand that probably hadn’t touched a dish in years. “Lovely to see you again.”

“Mrs. Hayes,” I said, shaking it. “Appreciate you having me.”

Her father looked up, finally acknowledging me with a quick nod. “You keeping busy?”

“Yes, sir. The club’s doing well. Restaurant’s finding its groove.”

He grunted something close to approval and looked back down at his phone.

We sat. And for the next forty-five minutes, it felt like a job interview in a tux.

Anya’s mom went on about some gala she was chairing.

Her dad chimed in about hedge fund performance.

Her brother Jason, seated across from me, talked about his new real estate venture in Aspen, like he was building the next empire.

I sat back, sipped water, and kept the conversation polite. I knew the game. But damn, it was exhausting. Then Jason turned his attention to me.

“So, Omir,” he said, voice slick and smirky. “What’s your next big move? Or you sticking with the whole entrepreneur vibe?”

I kept my tone steady. “Yeah. Looking at some expansion opportunities. The club’s been a cornerstone for me. The restaurant’s a newer challenge, but I’m in it for the long haul.”

Anya smiled, hand brushing my arm. “He’s being modest. Omir’s businesses are thriving.”

Jason smirked. “Wasn’t your brother just shot at that club of yours, though?”

The whole table froze.

Anya sucked in a breath. “Jason?—”

I stared at him, dead in the eye. Did he just?—

My jaw clenched, chest tight. That comment didn't just cross a line. It spit on it. I leaned forward slowly, every movement controlled. Calculated. But the fire in my chest? Livid. "You think that's funny?" I asked, voice low. "You think my brother dying is a punchline or something?"

Jason shrugged, smug. "Didn't say it was funny. Just seems like a liability. One minute it's jazz and cocktails, next it's a crime scene. Not exactly wedding-invite material."

Without thinking twice, I reached across the table and grabbed the front of his collar with one hand, yanking him forward so fast his wine glass tipped. His eyes went wide, hands flailing.

"You ever fix your mouth to speak on my brother again," I growled, "I'll forget who the fuck you are to my woman and knock your ass the hell out."

"Omigod!" Anya shouted, standing.

Her father rose. "Let go of him."

Jason's face had lost all that fake cockiness. He was shook, and he should've been. I stared him down, then slowly released my grip, pushing him back into his seat with a sneer. Silence fell over the table. Even the damn waiter froze mid-step.

I stood, straightened my jacket, grabbed my keys off the table, and looked around at the faces that couldn't hide their judgment if they tried.

"You sit up here talking about market trends and yacht clubs like that makes you better than people who built something from scratch with their bare hands." I glanced

at Anya.

Her eyes were filled with panic. Embarrassment.

Not once had she spoken up. Not for real. I shook my head. “I’m out.”

I turned and walked out of that restaurant like the damn place was on fire. I was just about to open my car door when I heard the quick, frantic tap of heels behind me.

“Omir—wait,” Anya called out.

I didn’t turn. Not at first.

“You really gonna chase me now?” I muttered under my breath, jaw tight. But still, I stayed where I was, breathing hard, gripping the door handle like it was the only thing grounding me.

She caught up, eyes wide, cheeks flushed from embarrassment or the cold—maybe both. “You can’t just walk out like that.”

I turned, slow. “Can’t? Anya, your brother disrespected my dead brother to my face. And nobody said shit. Not you, not your father. Y’all just sat there like I was the one outta line.”

“I was going to say something?—”

“Then why didn’t you?” My voice boomed louder than I meant it to, chest heaving. “You had the chance. The moment was right there, and you sat frozen. Like defending me would’ve cost you too much.”

Her mouth opened, but she didn’t respond right away. That hesitation? It said enough.

I shook my head. “You think I don’t see it? You love the idea of me, Anya. The jazz club owner with ambition. The guy who makes your life feel exciting and ‘different.’ But when it comes to standing in front of your family and saying, ‘That’s my man,’ you go quiet.”

“That’s not fair,” she snapped, stepping closer. “You are my man. I’ve never once treated you like anything less.”

“But you let them do it.”

Her lips trembled as she crossed her arms. “You embarrassed me in there, Omir. You put your hands on my brother .”

“You fucking right.” I stepped closer, eyes locked on hers. “He weaponized my grief. My family. I don’t play when it comes to O’Shea. You think I’m gonna just sit there and let him run his mouth like that?”

“I’m not asking you to sit there,” she said, voice breaking. “I’m asking you to think before you react. To trust me.”

“That’s the thing, Anya. I don’t know if I can.”

That hit her. I saw it in the way her body went still, her eyes blinking fast, her mouth parted like the words got stuck in her throat. She took a shaky breath. “I know my family isn’t warm. They’re not like. . . whatever image you have in your head of what love’s supposed to feel like.”

Whatever image I had. . . Yeah. I’d felt it. I knew exactly what it was supposed to feel like. And it hadn’t been at that table.

“But I love you,” she said suddenly, stepping closer. Her voice was quiet now,

trembling. “I love you, Omir. Not for your business. Not because of what you’ve built. I love you for who you are. Your fire. Your loyalty. Your stubborn ass heart that feels everything too deeply.”

I didn’t say anything. Couldn’t. My chest was tight. My mind a blur.

“And I don’t care what my family thinks,” she added, reaching for my hands. “I should’ve defended you. You’re right. I froze. But don’t walk away thinking you’re alone in this. You’re not.”

Her fingers slid into mine, warm and trembling. I looked down at our hands. . . then up at her. And I saw it. The sincerity. The softness behind her perfection. She looked like she meant it. So I pulled her in and kissed her. Long. Deep. Slow.

Her hands slid to the back of my neck, and I felt her melt into me like she needed this moment to breathe. And maybe I did too. When we broke apart, our foreheads rested together, our breaths mingling in the space between us.

“I just need you to stand beside me,” I murmured. “Not behind me. Not in silence. Beside me. That’s it.”

She nodded. “I hear you. And I’m here. All the way.”

I closed my eyes for a second and let that sink in. Let it settle. We stood there in the breeze, wrapped in something tender, something hard-earned. And for the first time all day, the storm in my chest started to settle. But even as I held her. . . a different name echoed in the back of my mind.

Lennox.

Not loud. Not intrusive. Just. . . there. Lingering like smoke. A familiar ache wrapped

in the memory of warmth. A memory of the way her family had embraced me without needing proof. The way her mom had patted my shoulder like I belonged.

And it hit me. . . Even in Anya's arms, I felt the ghost of something I hadn't let go of. Something that maybe. . . hadn't let go of me.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:15 am

LENNOX

The day of my father's funeral felt surreal, like I was floating outside of myself watching everything unfold. I sat in the front pew of the church, surrounded by my family, yet I felt completely alone. The weight of the day pressed on my chest, making it hard to breathe, hard to think.

As the pastor spoke about my father's life, I tried to focus on his words, but my mind kept drifting.

I thought about all the things my dad used to say to me—his advice, his jokes, his warm laugh that could fill a room.

He was the first man to tell me I was strong, the first to tell me I deserved the best in life. And now he was gone.

The sound of my mother's quiet sobs brought me back to the present. She was holding onto my brother's arm, her face hidden behind a handkerchief. I reached over and squeezed her hand, trying to offer some comfort, though I felt just as broken.

When it was my turn to speak, I stood on shaky legs and made my way to the podium. The church was packed—friends, extended family, coworkers, and neighbors who had all come to say goodbye. I gripped the sides of the lectern, took a deep breath, and began.

“My dad was everything to me,” I started, my voice trembling. “He was my guide, my protector, my biggest supporter. He taught me how to stand tall, even when life

tried to knock me down. He wasn't perfect—none of us are—but he loved fiercely and deeply, and that's what I'll always carry with me.”

I paused, swallowing the lump in my throat as tears blurred my vision. “He used to tell me that family is the most important thing in the world. And looking around this room, I can see how much he meant to all of you. Thank you for being here to honor him. He would've been so touched.”

As I stepped down and returned to my seat, the weight of my grief hit me like a tidal wave. The rest of the service passed in a haze, and before I knew it, we were at the cemetery, standing under a gray sky as my father's casket was lowered into the ground.

I clutched a single white rose, my fingers trembling as I let it fall onto the casket. “Goodbye, Daddy,” I whispered, my voice breaking. “I'll make you proud.”

Back at my parents' house, the repast was in full swing.

The living room was filled with the buzz of conversation, the clinking of glasses, and the sound of children playing.

My siblings and I sat together, surrounded by our significant others and extended family.

Everyone was sharing stories about my dad, laughing and crying as they remembered him.

“Remember when Daddy tried to fix the washing machine and flooded the entire laundry room?” Lorna said, laughing through her tears.

“He swore he knew what he was doing,” my brother Lawrence added. “And then he

blamed it on the instructions being wrong.”

We all laughed, the sound bittersweet. These were the moments I would hold onto—the laughter, the love, the feeling of being surrounded by people who understood my loss because it was theirs too.

After a while, I needed some air. I slipped out the back door and onto the porch, the cool evening breeze brushing against my skin.

I sat down on the steps, letting the tears I’d been holding back fall freely.

I was so caught up in my emotions that I didn’t hear Sherelle’s car pull up until she called out my name.

“Lennox?”

I turned to see her walking toward me, a bouquet of flowers in one hand and a box of desserts in the other. “Sherelle,” I said, wiping my eyes. “You didn’t have to come.”

“Of course I did,” she said, handing me the flowers. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be there. Life be life’ing.”

I hugged her tightly, grateful for her presence. “Thank you.”

We sat on the porch together, a bottle of wine between us. As we sipped, Sherelle asked about the service and how my mom was holding up. I told her about the stories everyone had shared, how much my dad had meant to so many people.

Sherelle sighed, swirling her wine in her glass. “Your dad was a good man, Lennox. He raised an incredible woman.”

Her words brought fresh tears to my eyes, but I managed a small smile. “Thanks.”

The conversation shifted to lighter topics—Sherelle’s new relationship and the drama at her job. But eventually, it circled back to what had been gnawing at me since Omir walked off my porch a few days ago.

“I’ve been thinking about Omir,” I admitted, staring into my wine glass.

Sherelle raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“I want to reach out to him,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “I don’t know what I’m expecting, but I feel like I need to say something. Maybe it’s selfish, but I can’t stop thinking about him.”

To my surprise, Sherelle didn’t try to talk me out of it. “So, reach out. What’s stopping you?”

I looked at her, my brow furrowed. “I don’t know. . . Everything? He’s engaged, for one. What if I’m just reopening old wounds?”

Sherelle shrugged. “Or what if it’s the closure you need? Or the start of something new? You won’t know unless you try, Lennox.”

Her words stuck with me long after she left. I sat on the porch, staring at the stars, my mind a storm of conflicting thoughts. Did I have the courage to tell Omir how I really felt? Or was I setting myself up for heartbreak all over again?

I didn’t have the answers, but as I went back inside and climbed into bed, one thing was clear: I couldn’t keep ignoring the pull I felt toward him. I just had to figure out when and how to take that leap.

I lay in the guest room bed, eyes fixed on the ceiling, following the lazy turn of the box fan blades as they cut through the still air.

The soft whirring sound did little to soothe the chaos behind my eyes.

My skin felt too hot beneath the sheets, the air too thick, and no position I twisted myself into could bring peace.

I sighed, kicking the blanket down to my ankles and pressing the heels of my hands into my eyes. Nothing worked. Sleep wouldn't come. It hadn't for nights. And when it did, it never stayed long enough to matter.

Every time I closed my eyes, I saw him.

Omir.

The way his lips curved when he was amused but trying not to show it. The way his voice dropped when he was serious. The way his energy could fill a room, even when he wasn't saying much. It was like he'd been stamped onto the backs of my eyelids, showing up every time I blinked.

I turned onto my side, hugging the pillow tighter, breathing deep in hopes it might slow my racing mind. But thoughts of him ran wild—how we ended, how I walked away, how I still felt him in the softest places of my memory.

At some point, the hum of the fan grew distant, the shadows in the room blurred at the edges, and the ache in my chest softened. My limbs got heavier, my breathing slower. I didn't even realize I was slipping. It just. . . happened.

And suddenly, I was standing in a sunlit room.

Everything was warm. Soft. Like honey melting on my skin. I looked down and saw ivory silk hugging my body in all the right places. I turned, and there he was.

Standing across from me in a cream-colored suit, no tie, shirt open just enough to show that spot on his chest I used to love kissing. His eyes held me steady, full of something too big for words. Something that made my knees weak.

We were saying vows—his voice deep, promising things that made my heart ache. Forever. Partnership. Home. My fingers trembled in his as I repeated them back, my voice smaller, but no less certain.

Then I blinked, and we were somewhere else.

A wraparound porch. A house with chipped white paint and sunflowers stretching tall from the yard.

My back rested against his chest, his hands splayed protectively over my belly—round and full with life.

He whispered something low against my ear that made me laugh, and I turned my face toward his, smiling like there was nothing else in the world but us.

Then came the sharp fluorescent lights of a hospital room. Sweat on my forehead, my fingers gripping his tighter than I meant to. I cried out—pain, power, fear—and his voice steadied me. Told me I was doing amazing. Told me I had this. Told me I wasn't alone.

And then. . . two babies. Wrapped in soft pink and blue blankets, cradled in my arms like they were carved from the deepest parts of my heart. Omir's lips pressed to my damp forehead. "You did it, baby," he whispered, eyes glassy. "You gave us everything."

The porch again.

It was dusk now. The twins—one boy, one girl—running wild in the grass. Omir stood at the grill, smoke rising into the golden air, laughter rolling from his chest like music. The kind that felt like home. My hand rested on my lap. . . and that was when I saw it.

The ring.

It wasn't mine. It wasn't simple or delicate or intentional like I would've picked. It was oversized. Flashy. Cold.

It was Anya's.

My stomach dropped.

And just like that, Omir began to fade—one slow step at a time, his back to me, until the sunlight dimmed and I was left reaching for someone who wasn't reaching back.

I woke with a jolt. My body shot upright, breath caught in my throat like I'd been drowning. I clutched at my chest, heart pounding against my ribs. The fan buzzed overhead, the room still dark, still.

Reality rushed in, mean and fast. It had been a dream. No porch. No babies. No vows. Just me. The tears came fast. Hot. Heavy. Unstoppable. I buried my face in my hands, my body curling inward like I could somehow protect myself from the ache blooming in my chest.

How could my heart do this to me? How could it dream him into my arms, into my future, just to yank him away? I'd walked away. I knew that. I had my reasons. But none of them felt like enough now. Not when I knew what it could've been. What it

should've been.

I couldn't just show up and ask him to choose me. Not when he'd already been chosen by someone else. A woman who didn't run.

I curled into myself, the bed creaking beneath me as my sobs turned to shallow breaths.

My fingertips trembled against my lips, like they remembered the way he used to kiss me when I couldn't find the words.

Eventually, the tears slowed. My chest still ached, but the weight of exhaustion was too heavy to fight off.

I lay back down, eyes unfocused, throat sore, lashes damp.

My pillow smelled like detergent and distance.

As I drifted again—this time with no dreams—I held onto one truth: I didn't deserve him. But I would never stop wanting him. Not in this life. Maybe not in the next. Even if it meant crying myself to sleep every night until the feeling faded—if it ever did.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:15 am

OMIR

The funeral was over, but the weight of it didn't let up.

It just clung to me—thick and heavy—like grief had soaked into my skin and made itself a permanent part of me.

The sadness, Cindy's screams as the casket was lowered into the ground and her running off with Juice, saying she was 'fucking done with everybody.' My father's solemn demeanor, like he was too tired of my brother's shit to even show a little emotion.

I stood there at the cemetery long after most people had drifted off to their cars, eyes locked on the fresh mound of dirt they'd just shoveled over my brother. O'Shea Harper. My little brother. My blood. Gone.

All because two dumb-ass, broke-ass cowards didn't know how to take "no" for an answer. The cops caught them posted up in a raggedy motel like that would save them from what they did. I should've felt something when I got the call. Relief. Closure. Something.

But there was nothing. Just that same emptiness. That same burn behind my eyes that refused to fade.

"You good, son?" My father's voice broke into my thoughts, his hand landing on my shoulder.

I didn't answer right away. My jaw was tight, teeth clenched. But I nodded. "Yeah. Let's head to the restaurant."

The repast was packed by the time we pulled up.

My staff had everything set up already—buffet trays lining the wall, filled with fried chicken, baked mac, greens, cornbread, all of it.

Soul food. The kind O'Shea used to tear through like he'd never eaten before.

The air was thick with the smell of seasoning, conversation, and mourning disguised as laughter.

I moved through it like a ghost. Nodding at folks.

Hugging aunties. Dapping up cousins. Listening to stories about O'Shea—some funny, some heartbreaking.

Everybody trying to act like we were celebrating his life, but you could still feel the ache in the air.

The way it hung behind people's eyes when they smiled too quickly.

"Omigod," my father called out from the bar, holding up a glass of bourbon.

I made my way over. He handed me a drink, and we clinked glasses without a word.

The silence between us was thick but not uncomfortable.

It was just heavy. Like everything else.

He sipped. Then, without looking at me, he said, “Where’s Anya?”

I took a breath. “She don’t do funerals.”

His eyes cut toward me—sharp, disappointed. “She don’t do funerals? Omir, she’s getting ready to be your wife.”

“She’s been supportive in other ways,” I said, my voice a little too clipped.

He shook his head. “Your mother wouldn’t have missed this if it was me burying my brother. Hell, she wouldn’t even ask.”

I downed the rest of my drink. “It’s not the same.”

“No, it’s not,” he said. “Because that woman stood by me when I didn’t have a damn thing but a name and a dream. And here you are, . . . already making excuses for someone who ain’t even tried to show up.”

That hit. Hard.

He stared at me for a beat, then his tone softened just enough. “You grown. I’m not telling you what to do. But don’t walk into marriage with blinders on. You either build together, or you fall apart.”

He clapped my shoulder and walked off to rejoin his brothers. I just stood there, gripping the bar, feeling like somebody had pulled the floor out from under me.

Later, when most of the crowd had trickled out, I found myself posted up at the bar with Marcus and Jordan, two of my day ones since back when we were hustling, trying to be the next Nino Brown and them.

Marcus took a swig from his beer. “You holding up?”

I shrugged. “I’m here.”

“That don’t mean shit, and you know it,” Jordan said, dragging his toothpick across the rim of his glass. “You good?”

I didn’t answer right away. Just looked down at the glass in front of me, half-empty but still untouched. “I’m breathing. That’s all I got right now.”

Jordan nodded. “That’s fair.”

Marcus leaned in a little. “What did your pops say earlier? He looked heated.”

I let out a low sigh. “Asked about Anya.”

Jordan raised an eyebrow. “She really ain’t show up.”

“She said she doesn’t do funerals,” I muttered.

Marcus and Jordan exchanged a look. “She serious?” Jordan said, sitting back. “Man, come on.”

“I’m dead ass. She said it’d be too hard. Too emotional. Said she’d support me from home.”

Jordan whistled low. “I ain’t tryna throw salt, but bruh, that’s. . . wild. I know damn well if I died, and my girl didn’t come, my ghost would be petty as hell.”

I cracked a half-smile, but it didn’t last. Marcus was quieter, more thoughtful. “You sure y’all built for the long haul, O?”

“She’s been good to me,” I said. “She’s not cold. She just. . . processes different.”

Jordan scoffed. “Nah, there’s processing different, and there’s being absent when it counts. Today? That was one of those days. Your brother. Your blood. Gone. And she couldn’t show up just to hold your hand?”

I didn’t have an answer. Not a real one.

Marcus finished his drink and set the bottle down. “It ain’t our business to tell you what to do. But sometimes, silence speaks loud. And her not being here? That said a lot.”

I let the words settle. Let them hit how they needed to. Then Jordan changed the subject. “You hear anything new from the cops?”

I nodded. “Yeah. They got ’em. Motel out by the county line. Both of them facing first-degree.”

We went quiet again. All of us staring at the bottles, the scuffed bar top, the shadows dancing along the walls. There was nothing left to say. At least, not out loud. Eventually, they stood to leave.

“Call us if you need anything,” Marcus said.

Jordan dabbed me up. “Don’t sit on that shit too long. You got time to figure it out—but don’t wait until it blows up.”

They walked out, leaving the door swinging shut behind them. I stayed where I was, still leaning on the bar, letting the silence take over the way it always did after the last body left.

When I finally locked up, the night air outside slapped me in the face—cool, sharp, cleansing.

I leaned against the hood of my car, looking up at the sky. Black canvas. No stars.

Jordan's words rang loud in my ears: "Don't sit on that shit too long. You got time to figure it out—but don't wait until it blows up."

And then, without thinking, I reached for my phone.

I opened Instagram and scrolled through my messages until I found Lennox's name. My finger hovered over the keyboard, but I didn't know what to say. I'd already told her I was sorry for her loss. What else could I say without crossing a line?

But even as I thought that, I couldn't deny the pull I felt toward her. I closed the app, locked my phone, and took my ass home.

The drive home was quiet but the kind of quiet that got under your skin. My thoughts were loud as hell. I'd turned the music off halfway through the ride because nothing sounded right. Not jazz, not soul, not even the old slow jams that usually helped me feel grounded. Everything felt off.

When I pulled up, Anya's car was parked out front. As I walked up to the front door, something in me felt. . . uneasy. Not the kind that made you look over your shoulder. Just the kind that made you brace. When I pushed the key in and turned the knob, I stepped inside, and there she was.

She was curled up on my couch like it was hers, wrapped in a cream knit blanket, candles burning low on the console table behind her.

A half-finished glass of white wine sat on the end table, and her heels were off,

tucked neatly to the side.

She had on one of her silk robes—the one with the feathered sleeves I used to joke made her look like a 1920s jazz widow.

I paused in the doorway. She looked up, her expression softening as she closed her laptop. “Hey,” she said quietly. “I didn’t know how long you’d be. I wanted to be here when you got back.”

I slipped off my jacket and hung it on the back of the kitchen chair, walking toward her slowly. “I figured that.”

She flinched a little but recovered quickly. “I’m sorry. I just. . . I knew today would be a lot. For you. I didn’t want to be in the way.”

“In the way?” I repeated, dragging a hand across my face. “Anya, he’s my fucking brother.”

“I know,” she said, rising from the couch. “And I know I should’ve been there. I just—I’ve been to too many funerals, Omir. And I didn’t want to bring that energy to you. That grief? That weight? I thought maybe you’d need space.”

I exhaled slowly, leaning against the edge of the kitchen counter. “You ever stop to think maybe I didn’t need space? Maybe I needed you ?”

She moved toward me, slow and careful, like I might shatter. “I’m here now.”

“I needed you then, Anya,” I said. My voice wasn’t raised, but it had weight. “Shit didn’t feel like space. It felt like absence.”

She winced. “I’m sorry.” I nodded. “I brought dinner,” she said after a beat, trying to

soften the air. “Well, takeout. I didn’t know if you’d want something different than what was there.”

“I’m not hungry.”

She stood there, robe tied tight, arms crossed in that way she did when she didn’t know what to say next.

“I know today’s not about me,” she said quietly.

“And I know you’re hurting. But Omir, I am trying.

I don’t always get it right, but I need you to believe I’m doing my best to show up for you in the ways I know how. ”

That was what made it harder; she wasn’t malicious. She wasn’t cold. But she didn’t see me. Not the real me. Not in the way I needed to be seen. She loved the surface of me. The success. The ambition. And I couldn’t lie to myself. . . I was starting to resent it.

“Do you want me to go?”

I looked at her, standing in the soft glow of candlelight, beautiful as hell and yet feeling like a stranger. “I don’t know,” I said honestly. “I really don’t.”

She took the blanket off her shoulders and disappeared upstairs. It seemed like I blinked, and she was back downstairs, slipping into her heels and reaching for her purse with trembling hands. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

I didn’t stop her when she walked to the door.

Didn't kiss her. Didn't ask her to stay.

The door clicked shut behind her, and the silence returned, thicker than before.

I sank onto the couch, elbows on my knees, head in my hands.

Was this what love was supposed to feel like?

Because if it was, why did it feel so goddamn lonely?

And then, like clockwork, Lennox's name floated up in my mind.

I didn't summon her. She just came, like she always did. Was I making the right choices, or was I just trying to convince myself that I was?

LENNOX

The meeting ended with a polite chorus of “Take care, Lennox,” and smiles.

The screen faded to black, leaving nothing but my reflection staring back at me, faint and worn-out in the gloss of the laptop.

I closed it slowly, letting my fingers linger like the weight of everything I hadn’t said was trapped under the lid.

Jevon’s smile had been tight the entire time. Ever since that night at my place, things between us had shifted. But I didn’t care in the least, especially not when my thoughts were full of another man. Omir. That man was in my bloodstream. I couldn’t shake him if I tried. And God, I’d tried.

I stood and began pacing the guest bedroom as the loop began playing in my head.

The night we met. The intensity. Our first night together.

Our last moments. Finding out he’s engaged.

Missing him. Wanting to feel him again. Seeing him.

Him in the kitchen with my mother. Laughing.

Hugging me. Kissing me. Everything hit me.

The way I'd stood in his presence but hadn't said a damn word that mattered.

I was leaving for Chicago the day after tomorrow.

My perfectly structured life. But here I was, spinning, spiraling, stuck.

Could I really just leave without saying it?

I stopped mid-step, ran both hands through my hair, and whispered, "No." But I wasn't the kind of woman who begged.

I didn't chase. I didn't show up at no man's door, spilling feelings like a broken faucet.

Except, . . . maybe I did. Because I couldn't not say it. Not now. Not after everything.

I sat down on the edge of the bed, grabbed my phone, and stared at Omir's name in my recent Instagram messages. My thumb hovered over the screen as I typed:

Can you meet me tonight? I need to talk to you. It's important and can't wait.

My heart pounded as I stared at the message. Sent. And then came the wait. I stood. I sat. I stood again. I told myself I was being ridiculous. That he probably wouldn't even respond. That maybe he'd moved on for real this time.

But then my phone lit up.

ODaGoat: Where do you wanna meet?

My breath hitched. I typed back quickly:

The park by the ABH lake. 9 p.m.

No reply at first. Doubt crept in like smoke under a door.

Then. . .

ODaGoat: Cool. See you there.

I pressed the phone to my chest, eyes closing as I exhaled a breath I didn't realize I was holding.

This was happening.

I showered, took my time getting dressed.

Nothing overdone—just a black long-sleeve knit dress that hugged me right at the waist, paired with a cropped jean jacket and ankle boots.

My makeup was soft but flawless, lips glossy, lashes curled, brows sharp.

I pulled my hair into a sleek ponytail, checked the mirror twice, then three more times.

My eyes looked tired. Haunted. But I was still me. And I needed to do this. No matter how it ended.

I headed downstairs to find my mom sitting in the kitchen with a mug of tea and that look on her face. The one that said she knew something was off without asking. “You’re dressed like you’re meeting somebody,” she said, sipping slowly.

I gave her a small smile. “I am.”

She didn't press at first. Just nodded. "Omigod?" I paused, then nodded.

Tears stung the backs of my eyes before I could stop them.

I looked away. "Oh, baby. . ." she said, her voice soft and knowing.

"You can leave a city, Lennox. You can leave a job. Hell, you can even leave a man's house.

But when somebody's in your heart like that?

Time don't undo it. Distance don't fix it. Only truth does."

I looked back at her, finally letting a tear fall. "I'm scared, Mom."

"Of what?"

"Of being rejected. I literally pushed him away. What am I even doing?"

She reached across the table and squeezed my hand. "You speak your truth anyway. Because what's worse, getting your heart broken or living your whole life wondering what would've happened if you'd just opened your mouth?"

The gravel crunched beneath my tires as I pulled into the small lot by the lake, the moon hanging low, silver and solemn over the water. The city felt miles away out here, even though it wasn't. The sounds were different—quiet, still, like everything had paused just for us.

I spotted his car immediately parked crooked like he got there fast and didn't care about lines.

He was leaning against the hood, one boot crossed over the other, hands shoved into the pockets of his black hoodie.

His beard was scruffy. Eyes low. His head tilted when he saw me approach, that same unreadable look in his eyes that had always driven me crazy. God, he was fine.

He always had been. But this was different. This was a man hardened by loss and sharpened by silence. Still grieving. Still standing. And every damn part of me wanted to run into his arms and tell him I never should've let him go.

I stepped out of the car, my boots crunching softly against the gravel. He didn't move.

"Hey," I said, voice soft.

"Hey." His tone matched mine—quiet, careful—but his eyes never left mine.

We walked side by side toward the water, toward that familiar bench. Neither of us said anything, not at first. The breeze off the lake was cool and smelled like pine and memory. My heart thundered so loud I was sure he could hear it.

He stared at the lake. I stared at him. "So," he said finally. "What's so important it couldn't wait?"

I took a shaky breath. "Omir. . . I need to be honest with you."

He turned to me, jaw tight. "Alright. Be honest."

"I love you."

His body went still, but his face didn't move. "Don't."

“I mean it,” I whispered. “I’ve loved you since the first time I laid eyes on you. I just?—”

“Don’t do that, Lennox.” His voice was firmer now. “Don’t drop this shit on me like it’s supposed to fix anything.”

I blinked, caught off guard. “I’m not trying to fix anything. I just. . . I couldn’t leave again without telling you. I had to?—”

“What? Ease your conscience?”

“No!” I snapped, heat rising in my chest. “This isn’t about guilt. This is about truth. I’m standing here trying to own something. Something I should’ve said a long time ago.”

He laughed, low and bitter, shaking his head. “You wanna talk about time? Where the hell was all this truth when I was telling you what it was from jump? When I was fucked up in silence after you left without so much as a fight?”

“I didn’t know how to stay!” I shot back. “I didn’t know how to choose my career and something new! I was scared, Omir!”

He stood up, pacing now. The moonlight lit up his expression—his anger, his pain, the way his fists clenched as he fought to stay calm.

“You think I wasn’t scared? You think I didn’t have doubts?”

Hell, I don’t even believe in love at first sight type shit, but with you, I felt it. I knew what the fuck it was.”

I stood too. “I’m not here asking you to erase everything. I’m not asking you to take

me back. I'm asking you to see me. Right now."

He turned to face me fully, his chest rising and falling with each breath. "And what the hell am I supposed to do with this, Lennox? I'm engaged. I'm getting fucking married." That sliced through me like glass.

"I know," I said, barely able to breathe through the ache. "And I hate that I'm saying all of this now, when it's probably too late. But if I didn't, I'd regret it for the rest of my life. You deserve to know. Whether you can forgive me or not. Whether you want me or not, I had to say it."

He stared at me, and for a second—just one second—I saw it. That flicker. That thing that had always lived between us. Raw and unspoken. It was still there. And then it was gone.

His voice was low when he said, "You don't get to show up with the truth when it's convenient. You don't get to light a match and walk away from a fire you started, then come back later, talking about love. That's selfish as fuck of you."

Tears slid down my cheeks. Silent. Hot. "I'm sorry, Omir," I whispered.

"So am I," he said, and his voice broke just slightly. "Because I never stopped loving you." I pressed my hand to my chest, trying to hold the pieces together. "But I don't know how to let you back in without breaking everything I've built in your absence," he finished.

I nodded, even though it shattered me. "I understand." We stood there, inches apart, the lake reflecting every ache neither of us could say. "I, uh. . . I leave tomorrow," I said, voice thick.

He looked like he wanted to say something. Maybe to stop me. Maybe to walk away

first. But he just nodded. And I turned. Walked back to my car with every step tearing something inside me. I didn't look back. I couldn't. Because loving him meant letting him go this time. For real.

OMIR

The tailor shop smelled like starch, old wood, and tension. That old-school kind of tension. The kind that comes when two worlds don't just collide they grind against each other, rough and loud and unforgiving.

I stood in front of the mirror in a black tuxedo jacket that had just been pinned, the tailor still adjusting the cuffs. It looked good. Sharp lines. Smooth shoulders. The kind of shit you see on magazine covers.

And yet?—

“It’s a bit snug in the shoulders, don’t you think?”

His voice sliced through the quiet like a razor. Anya’s father. Standing at the far end of the shop, dressed in some custom navy suit that probably cost more than my first car. Salt-and-pepper hair, glasses halfway down his nose, arms folded like a judge waiting to sentence someone.

I looked at him through the mirror, then down at the jacket. “It’s cool,” I said flatly. “I’ll take it.”

He tilted his head, smirking like he knew something I didn’t. “Well, I suppose it’s better than the. . . streetwear you usually go for. Or those basic slacks you seem to like so much.”

My jaw flexed. I didn’t move. I didn’t have to move. The tension in the room shifted

on its own. Marcus and Jordan both looked up from where they were standing across the shop, near a display of silk bowties.

“Streetwear?” Jordan repeated, raising an eyebrow. “That’s what we’re calling business casual now?”

“Bro,” I warned him, my voice low.

“What? I’m just saying,” he replied, his tone slick, ignoring me like always. “Man acting like we rolled up in hoodies and Forces.”

Mr. Hayes didn’t even flinch. Just kept his gaze locked on mine, like I was the help trying on clothes that didn’t belong to me.

“It’s just. . . different, Omir,” he said, voice casual but every word dipped in condescension.

“I’m sure Anya sees something in you, but I’ll be honest—I always expected her to end up with someone a little more. . . polished.”

I took a step forward, slow, deliberate. My fists clenched, but I kept my voice steady. “With all due respect, sir, I run two successful businesses. I provide for your daughter. I show up. I don’t know what more you expect from me.”

He didn’t blink. “It’s not about money, son. It’s about legacy. Family. Belonging to a certain. . . caliber of people. You’re trying to marry into a different kind of world.”

“That’s funny,” Jordan muttered. “I thought marriage was about bringing two worlds together. The fuck?”

Marcus grabbed him by the arm and whispered, “Chill, bro. For real. Don’t even feed

into this shit.”

Mr. Hayes stepped closer, lowering his voice just enough for it to sting. “This marriage, . . . it’s not just about love, Omir. It’s about image. Structure. You should understand that if you want to build something that lasts.”

I stepped back, shrugged off the tuxedo jacket, and handed it to the tailor without a word. “I’ll be outside,” I muttered, already walking toward the door.

The second that cool air hit my face, I let out a slow breath and leaned against my car. My hands trembled. Not from fear. From restraint. That man was lucky I had self-control.

I pulled out my phone, thumb hovering over Anya’s name. I thought about calling her. Telling her what happened. Letting her know I needed her to check her father.

But I didn’t press it. Because in that moment, the only face that flashed in my mind was Lennox. Her eyes. Her voice. Her truth spilling out at the lake like it had been sitting heavy on her soul for months.

“I love you.”

Fuck. I clenched my jaw and shoved the phone back in my pocket.

I couldn’t do this. I couldn’t pretend like I was okay with marrying into a family that looked down on me like I was temporary.

Like I was tolerated instead of embraced.

I couldn’t walk into forever with a woman who, as beautiful and kind as Anya was, didn’t hold weight when it came to Lennox.

I didn't remember the drive. Not really.

One minute I was gripping the wheel like it might fly out of my hands, and the next I was pulling up to the bridal boutique.

Outside, the windows glowed soft with warm light.

Inside, Anya stood on a raised platform, a white gown draped around her body like a dream she'd been building since she was a little girl.

Her friends stood around her. Her mother was adjusting the veil, smiling like it was already done. And I stood there. Watching it all. Knowing I was about to shatter the whole damn thing. I pushed open the door and cleared my throat.

"Anya."

Everyone turned. The room went still.

Her smile faded the second she saw my face. "Omir? What are you?—?"

"Can we talk?" I said, my voice low but firm. "Outside."

Her mom stepped forward. "We're in the middle of?—"

"We need to talk now."

Anya blinked, then nodded. "Okay." She followed me out to the sidewalk, her heels clicking softly against the concrete. The dress still trailed behind her like a train of innocence I didn't deserve to touch. We stopped under the golden late afternoon light. She crossed her arms. "What's going on?"

I swallowed hard. I had to say it. No matter what it broke. “I can’t do this shit.”

She blinked. “Can’t do what?”

“This,” I said, gesturing between us. “The wedding. Us.”

Her face cracked like glass. “What. . . what are you saying?”

“I’m saying I can’t marry you.” My throat burned. “Because I’m in love with someone else.”

The silence after that? Heavy. Deafening. Her voice shook. “You’re what?”

“I’ve tried to push it down. Tell myself it was old feelings. That it didn’t matter. But I’m not built to live a lie, Anya. Not with you. Not with myself.”

Tears filled her eyes. “You should’ve told me sooner.”

“I didn’t know sooner. Not like this.”

She looked away, wiping her face with the back of her hand. “Who is it?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“The hell it doesn’t,” she snapped, voice trembling. “Who is she, Omir?”

I stared at her, and for a second, I wanted to say her name, but I didn’t. “Someone who feels like home.”

Her eyes closed like the words had hit bone. “You know what hurts?” she whispered. “I could feel something was off, but I was trying because I believed in you. In us.”

“I know. And you deserve someone who’s gonna believe in you the same way.”

She looked at me like she was searching for a different answer. One that would make this all make sense. But there wasn’t one. “You’re not a bad man, Omir,” she said quietly. “But you broke something in me today.”

I looked down. “I never meant to, Anya. I swear.”

She wiped her face again, composed even in heartbreak. “You know what? Just go.”

My chest ached. “I’m sorry.”

She nodded once. “Goodbye, Omir.”

I stood there long after she’d gone back inside.

Long after the sun dipped low and the street lights flickered on.

I’d just broken a good woman’s heart and it hurt.

But beneath the guilt, the sadness, the regret.

. . was something else. Clarity. I knew who I loved.

And for the first time in months, I knew what I had to do.

LENNOX

Packing was harder than I thought it would be.

Not because I didn't know how to do it—I'd packed for two-week work trips and international conferences with less hesitation.

It was the emotional weight. Folding sweaters felt like folding away pieces of myself I wasn't ready to deal with.

Every shirt, every heel, every pair of jeans—somehow, they all reminded me of the night at the lake. Of everything I didn't say soon enough.

I sat on the edge of my bed, staring down at the half-filled suitcase. My heart felt like it was somewhere between my throat and my stomach.

I'd missed my window. He was engaged. And I was too late. A knock on my door broke the silence.

"Yeah?" I called out, not moving.

The door opened slowly, and Lawrence stepped in, leaning against the frame with that same skeptical big brother look he always gave me when he could tell I was about to lie and say I was fine. "You heading back tomorrow?"

I nodded. "Flight's in the morning."

He looked around the room, then pointed at the suitcase. “You moving slow on purpose or just emotionally paralyzed?”

I cracked a half-smile. “Somewhere in between.”

He walked in, took a seat in the chair near my window, and exhaled like he’d been saving this conversation for the right moment. “So, . . . you done pretending?”

I looked over at him. “Pretending what?”

“That everything’s cool. That you’re good. Ma said you saw some dude. Omir?”

I sighed and leaned back on my hands. “Yeah. I saw him.”

He nodded slowly. “And?”

“And I told him how I felt. Finally. After all this time.”

“Okay.” He scratched his chin. “And what’d he say?”

“That he loved me too.”

“But you’re still here packing like somebody broke your heart.”

I laughed, but it didn’t come out joyful. “Because I walked away.”

“Wait, . . . hold up,” he said, sitting forward. “He told you he loved you but then left?”

“He’s engaged. Loving me doesn’t mean he can just walk away from everything he built with her.”

Lawrence scoffed. “Sis, look. I don’t know dude, but I know men. He walked away because he wasn’t ready to deal with what you laid at his feet. Not because he doesn’t feel it. But that ain’t your fault, Lennox. You showed up. Finally. You did what you were supposed to do.”

I looked down at my hands. “I just. . . I waited too long.”

“Maybe. But maybe the timing had to break for y’all to realize what it is.”

I didn’t say anything. Because part of me was still pissed I hadn’t gotten the perfect ending. The clean resolution. The dramatic kiss in the rain moment. Instead, I got silence. And regret. And now I had to go back to Chicago and pretend none of it happened.

Lawrence stood and walked over to me. “You leaving because it’s what you want, or because you’re scared to see what happens if you stay?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know anymore.”

“Well, figure that out. But don’t run ’cause your feelings got hurt. That ain’t the woman you are.”

That was a week ago. Now, I was back in Chicago. Back in my element. Or at least, that was what I told myself. My calendar was jammed, inbox overflowing, and every second of every day was filled with deadlines, calls, and presentations.

It was easier to throw myself into my work than deal with the echo of his name in my head.

I sat at the head of the long glass table in the boardroom, finishing up a campaign presentation for a new client—a tech startup with a slick AI concept and zero

branding. The CEO, a young black woman with a sharp bob and sharper ideas, nodded as I walked her through my strategy.

“This is exactly the energy we’re going for,” she said, clearly impressed. “I feel like your team gets us.”

“That’s what we do,” I said, smiling, even though I felt emotionally numb inside. “We help visionaries look like what they are.”

We wrapped up, shook hands, and I saw her out just as Bethany, my assistant, hovered by the door.

“Ms. Anderson?”

I looked up. “Yeah?”

“There’s someone here to see you.”

I frowned. “Do they have an appointment?”

“No.” She glanced over her shoulder. “He wouldn’t give a name. Just said it’s important.”

I blinked. “Okay. . . Send him back in five.”

“Sure thing.”

I straightened the papers on the table, tidied up, ran my fingers through my hair, and figured it was probably a walk-in trying to pitch something or complain about something. I had a million of those. But when I turned around and saw who was standing in the doorway, I forgot how to breathe.

Omir.

Tall. Clean. Heartbreakingly fine in a charcoal suit, his tie loose, shirt unbuttoned just enough to remind me how dangerous he was. He was holding a bouquet of deep red roses. Big. Bold. Dramatic. Just like this moment. His eyes found mine, and I swear the room disappeared.

“Hey,” he said, voice low. Almost unsure.

I blinked, stunned. “What are you doing here?”

“I had to see you.”

I cleared my throat. “Come this way.” He followed me into my office. I closed the door behind him, trying to pull myself together. “What’s going on?” I asked, arms crossed. “You show up in my office out of nowhere? After everything?”

He stepped forward and held out the flowers. “These are for you.”

I hesitated, then took them. “Thanks.” I set them down and looked up at him, not trying to hide my confusion. “Why are you here?”

“I ended it with Anya.”

The words hit hard. I blinked. “Wait. You. . . what?”

“I broke it off,” he repeated. “I told her the truth. That I’ve been in love with someone else and ignoring it.”

I felt the walls I’d built around my heart tremble. “Are you serious right now?”

He stepped closer. “I should’ve said it back then. At the lake. But I was in my feelings. Pissed at you. Torn about. . . everything. I didn’t want to hurt her, but I couldn’t keep lying. Not to her. And not to myself.”

I stared at him, trying to keep it together. “So you broke off an engagement. . . for me?”

He shook his head. “ Because of you. Because I never stopped thinking about you. Because every time I closed my eyes, I saw you. Lennox, you’re not easy. You’re strong, complicated, stubborn as hell, but I love you. Always will.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “Omir. . .”

“I don’t expect shit to be easy. I don’t expect everything to just fall into place. This ain’t a fucking movie or urban romance book. This shit is real life. But I had to come tell you in person—I love you, Lennox. I never stopped. And I’m not letting you go again.”

Tears stung my eyes. I shook my head slowly. “I hurt you.”

“We both fucked it up. But the thing about time is, that shit always comes back around.”

My hands trembled as I walked toward him. “What happens now?”

“We figure it out. Chicago, Arbor Hills—I don’t care where we live. I care who I’m with. And that’s you.”

The tears fell before I could stop them. “I love you too,” I whispered. “God, I love you so much it scares me.”

He cupped my face with both hands, his thumbs wiping the tears from my cheeks. “Then let’s be scared together, baby.”

Without another word, he pulled me into his arms, crushing his lips against mine with a hunger that stole my breath—rough, deep, unrelenting.

I moaned into his mouth as his tongue slid against mine, hot and wet, devouring me like he’d been starving, and I was the only thing that could satisfy him.

His hands were everywhere, fisting the back of my blazer, sliding up my silk blouse, palming my breasts like he needed to memorize them all over again.

“Fuck, you feel so good.” He growled against my lips, yanking the blouse open and exposing my lace bra. “I missed this shit. I missed you .”

I didn’t answer. Couldn’t. My hand was already sliding down between us, grabbing the thick length straining through his pants. He hissed through his teeth and rocked into my palm, his cock growing impossibly harder beneath my touch.

“Shit,” he muttered, kissing me harder, more frantically, like the taste of me was the only thing keeping him sane. Then he broke the kiss just long enough to pant. “I need to taste this pussy. Now.”

I gasped as he grabbed me by the hips and lifted me onto my desk like I weighed nothing. My back hit the cool wood, my skirt hiked up to my waist, and my panties? Gone—tugged off like they offended him.

He dropped to his knees, spreading my thighs wide, and the second his mouth touched me, I damn near screamed. “Oh my God, Omir!”

He groaned as he licked me, tongue sliding between my folds with thick, wet strokes,

dragging circles around my clit like he knew exactly how to wreck me. He looked up once, his mouth glistening, and said, “You taste just like I remember.”

I writhed on the desk, my legs shaking as he sucked on my clit, flicking his tongue fast, slow, then fast again, switching up just when I thought I’d figured out the rhythm. My hands gripped the edge of the desk, knuckles white. “Don’t stop. . . please, Omir. . .”

He didn’t. If anything, he went harder, groaning into me, burying his face deeper like he was trying to climb inside and stay there forever. My orgasm built fast, brutal, the kind that made my thighs lock around his head and my whole body convulse.

“Oh fuck—Omir!” I cried out, my pussy pulsing against his tongue as I came, wave after wave crashing through me. He held me down, lapping me up like he was trying to drink every drop.

When he finally stood, his mouth was slick with me, his eyes hooded and wild.

“I’ve been dreaming about that pussy,” he muttered, peeling away his clothes. His dick sprang free—thick, long, veins pulsing. I didn’t get the chance to marvel before he grabbed me by the waist and spun me around. “Bend that ass over.”

I obeyed instantly, bracing my hands on the desk as he kicked my legs apart. His fingers slid between my folds, still soaking wet.

“Is this pussy still mine?”

“Yes,” I breathed out, arching my back. “All yours.”

He didn’t need any more than that. I felt the thick head of his dick press against my entrance, then slam into me in one powerful thrust. I gasped, biting my lip as he filled

me to the hilt.

“Fuck, Lennox,” he groaned, gripping my hips like he was holding on for dear life. “Still tight as fuck.”

He started to move, slow at first, deep strokes that dragged along every nerve ending, making me shudder. Then he picked up the pace, hips slapping against my ass, his balls bouncing off my clit with each thrust.

“Yesss,” I moaned, fingernails scratching up my desk. “Right there, Omir. Right there.”

“Look at you.” He grunted.

I threw my head back as he pounded into me, each stroke harder, faster, deeper. The sound of our bodies clapping echoed in the office, filthy and raw. His hand slid around and found my clit, rubbing fast circles as he fucked me, and I almost collapsed.

“Omira—I’m gonna cum again?—”

“Let go, baby. Let that shit go.”

I cried out, my pussy tightening around him like a fist, my legs trembling as my second orgasm tore through me. He didn’t slow down, didn’t stop. If anything, he started to lose control—his rhythm getting rougher, his breaths coming faster.

“Where do you want it?” he growled, voice ragged. “Tell me.”

I moaned, dizzy with need. “Inside me. Fuck—inside.”

He let out a deep groan, his thrusts turning savage. “You sure?”

“Yes—please. Fill me up.”

His fingers dug into my hips as he buried himself one last time, deep and hard. He let out a low, guttural moan as he came, his dick pulsing inside me, spilling into me in thick, hot waves.

We stayed like that, bodies pressed together, chests heaving—until the storm passed. Omir leaned forward, kissing my shoulder, my neck, the side of my face. “I fucking love you,” he whispered, voice rough, hand sliding across my stomach like he was claiming every inch of me.

I turned my head, meeting his lips, tasting myself on his tongue. “I love you too.”

And for the first time in what felt like forever, I didn’t feel like I was chasing something. I felt home.

OMIR

“Yo! Chill with that box—it’s marked ‘fragile,’ not ‘toss this shit like it owes you money!’” I barked across the room, watching a mover practically launch a box onto the entryway rug.

Dude flinched, mumbled something like “My bad, boss,” and adjusted his grip.

I sighed, rubbing the back of my neck, glancing around our new home. Boxes stacked like Tetris in the hallway. Furniture half-assembled. Baby gear everywhere. It looked like chaos—but it felt like peace. We’d done it.

Eighteen months ago, none of this was guaranteed. Back then, we were just two people trying to find our way back to each other. Now? We were a family. Two kids deep, his and hers sinks, and matching bathrobes.

The house smelled like new beginnings—fresh paint and soft jasmine from one of Lennox’s candles. Sunlight poured through the bay windows we both said yes to the second we stepped foot in here. We didn’t even care about the price tag. It felt like ours the moment we saw it.

“Omir!”

I turned to the front porch just in time to see her struggling to carry two car seats, one in each hand, diaper bag slung across her shoulder, hair twisted up in a messy bun. And God, she was still beautiful as hell.

“I told you to wait for me,” I said, jogging over and grabbing both carriers before she dropped a child.

“I did. You were too busy yelling and pretending you’re the box police.”

I laughed and kissed her forehead. “You good?”

She exhaled, heavy and dramatic. “I’m starving, I can’t feel my arms, and if I don’t find that blender in the next hour so I can make a virgin pina colada, I might snap.”

“I’ll find the blender, woman. You go sit down and feed my babies.”

She gave me that look. The one that said she was trying to stay irritated but was secretly softening. “You really gonna spoil me every day?”

“Every day until they bury me.”

She shook her head, smiling like she didn’t want to. “You better.”

By the time the movers were done, the sun had dipped behind the trees. Everything was everywhere—cribs still unbuilt, boxes labeled ‘Bathroom???’ in the wrong room. But I didn’t care. The house was messy and real. Just like us.

I sank onto the porch steps with a glass of whiskey in my hand, muscles sore, eyes heavy. And I thought about everything Lennox had been through. Everything we’d been through.

Her pregnancy with the twins felt like the universe throwing us into the deep end—no floaties. Shit was hard. Her body changed fast. Her moods changed faster. She cried over losing her abs. Over a dropped cookie. Over a TikTok of a puppy reunion. Then she’d cuss me out for breathing too loud.

She swelled up. Couldn't see her ankles. Couldn't shave without help. Couldn't sleep unless my hand was on her stomach. And still—she showed up to Zoom meetings. Rocked presentations. Secured her bag from the couch while propped up on pregnancy pillows, laptop balanced on her belly.

She'd work a full day, then cry in my arms because she didn't feel "like herself." And I'd kiss on her and tell her she was everything. I'd rub her feet while she drifted off to sleep, one hand on her stomach, feeling them kick.

Watching her carry our twins made me fall in love with her all over again. Made me realize love wasn't just in the romance—it was in the sacrifice. The discomfort. The quiet way she endured for us. For them.

The porch door creaked open, and Lennox stepped out with our daughter in her arms—swaddled, sleepy, cheeks full and round. She sat beside me, her body folding into mine like she belonged there. Because she did.

"Still thinking about the boxes?" she asked, teasing.

"Nah," I said, staring at our daughter. "Thinking about your pregnancy."

She raised an eyebrow. "That's random."

"I watched you go through a lot, baby. I truly fucking love you."

She blinked quickly, and I saw the tears she tried to hide. "You know," she said, "I used to think love meant ease. The movies make it look so smooth."

I scoffed. "Movies don't show the two a.m. bathroom breakdowns. The I-hate-my-body days. The 'I don't know how to forgive you but I'm trying' fights."

She looked up at me, eyes full of memory. "But we made it."

“We did.”

“No matter how hard it gets,” she said quietly, “I’ll never stop choosing you.” I took her hand, and she leaned in, kissing me slow and deep. Not rushed. Not out of lust. Out of knowing.

Because we’d been through the fire and came out better after the smoke cleared. As we sat there under the stars, we didn’t say much else. We didn’t have to. The life we built said it for us. This love wasn’t perfect, but it was permanent, and we were just getting started.