



Forbidden Fruit

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Did she make a deal with the devil? Or will the forbidden fruit be worth every bite?

RAYA:

I thought I had finally put my troubled past behind me. Moving from Texas to Orange County, I reinvented myself and quickly became the star bartender at Sweet Cocktails, thanks to my secret recipe for raspberry martinis. But everything changed when an undercover agent revealed my secret ingredient comes from the private land of Maxwell Evans, a reclusive billionaire with dangerous ties to a drug cartel.

Now, I'm caught in a web of deception, forced to spy on Maxwell in exchange for keeping my secret safe. Every encounter with him is a tantalizing dance of danger and desire. His smoldering eyes and commanding presence make it hard to remember my mission. The closer I get, the more I crave his touch, but I know getting involved could destroy us both. Will I uncover his secrets, or will I be consumed by the forbidden allure of Maxwell Evans?

MAXWELL:

I knew someone was stealing my raspberries, but I never expected it to be a stunning bartender like Raya Kinkaid. She thought she could trespass on my land without facing the consequences. Now, she's caught in my world, digging for my secrets, but she has no idea how deep they run.

Every time we meet, the air crackles with tension and undeniable attraction. Her defiance and allure make her impossible to resist, but I have my own game to play. I see through her façade, yet I can't help but want to claim her as mine. Will I gamble everything to keep her close, or will my secrets push her away? In this dangerous game of desire, nothing is as it seems, and surrendering to passion might be our only escape.

Total Pages (Source): 18

Page 1

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:43 am

Chapter One

RAYA

I swirled the ice in the shaker with a rhythmic clink, feeling the beat of the music pulse through the soles of my thigh-high black boots. The vibrant chatter of Sweet Cocktails wrapped around me like a warm embrace as I caught the lemon twist mid-air and spiraled it into the waiting glass. "One gin fizz, coming right up," I announced with a wink to the patron at the end of the bar.

"Make that two," called out another voice, eager not to be left out of the artisanal drink parade I orchestrated nightly. My hands moved of their own accord, part muscle memory, part showmanship, as I juggled bottles and garnishes, pouring the perfect measures of spirits and mixers.

"Raya! Your special martini, please?" An eager regular flagged me down from midway down the polished mahogany, her eyes sparkling with anticipation.

"Coming up," I replied, my lips curving into a smile. This was my moment—the raspberry martini, my secret recipe that had become something of an urban legend among the locals. I reached for the chilled bottle where the raspberries had been steeping in the vodka, infusing it with its rich, crimson hue.

As I mixed the concoction, the tangy-sweet aroma of raspberries filled the air, and a hush fell over the closest patrons, their attention riveted on the spectacle. I poured the liquid, now a vibrant pink, into the frosted martini glass, finishing it off with a skewer of fresh berries.

"Here you go," I said, sliding the glass across the bar. The woman took a sip, her eyes closing in bliss. "It's incredible, Raya. There's nothing like it anywhere else."

"Thank you," I replied, flushed with pride. It wasn't just the drink they came for; it was the experience, the escape from the mundane.

"Raya!" The bar owner, a middle-aged man with a silver-tipped goatee and sharp blue eyes, clapped his hand on my shoulder. "I've got to hand it to you; that martini of yours is a hit. You've really proven yourself since I took a chance on you."

"Thanks, boss," I said, my cheeks warming under his praise. It felt good to be recognized, to know that my creations brought something unique to the table.

"Keep it up," he encouraged before turning back to oversee the rest of the establishment.

I surveyed my kingdom—the gleaming glasses, the rows of bottles, each one promising a new story or an adventure. And there I was, Raya Kinkaid, the master mixologist, the creator of the secret raspberry martini, standing tall behind the bar of Sweet Cocktails, the hottest bar in Orange County, where every night was an opportunity to dazzle and delight. Not even I could have imagined I'd be standing here now, like I'd finally caught the golden ring of fortune and the future was simply mine for the taking.

As the hum of conversations melded with the clink of ice against glass, I caught Trina's eye from across the room. She was serving a boisterous group at a nearby table, but our gazes connected, sharing a silent conversation. She was both my roommate and best friend, and I knew that her small, knowing smile was a silent cheer for the successes we both harbored beneath the surface of our daily grind.

"Another round, Raya!" The shout snapped me back to the task at hand, and I turned

with a flourish, grabbing a bottle of premium vodka and spinning it in my hand. As I poured, my mind wandered for a brief second, carried away by the undercurrent of memories that always seemed to flow just beneath the shiny veneer of the present.

Back in Texas, the dusty little town where I grew up felt worlds away from the glitz and glam of California. My hands, once chapped and stained from the dirt of barren fields, now danced with practiced grace over the sleek bottles and shakers. Those days spent counting pennies for a meal, learning to trust no one, and relying solely on my wits had hardened me in ways these city folks couldn't begin to fathom. There, I had learned to be as sharp as the broken glass littering the parking lots I'd call home some nights, as resilient as the weeds sprouting through cracks in the sun-scorched pavement.

"Raya, you with us?" Trina's voice anchored me back to the present, concern flickering in her clear blue eyes. With a shake of my head, I banished the ghosts of my past and offered her a reassuring wink. I'd come so far from who and what I once was; I wouldn't let those shadows touch me again. Not while I had friends like Trina, not while I had a future that was mine to shape.

The clink of ice against glass punctuated the hum of conversation as I returned to the task at hand. The Friday night crowd at Sweet Cocktails was a blend of regulars and first-timers, all seeking the kind of escape only a well-mixed drink could provide. I spun the bottle in my hands again and poured with flair, letting the remainder of its crystal contents arc high into the air before splashing down into the awaiting glasses.

"Whiskey on the rocks, please," came a voice smooth like polished stone. Glancing up, I met the gaze of a man in a suit so sharp it could slice through the haze of alcohol that filled the room. He stood before me, his eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that felt like a challenge.

"Coming right up," I replied, my fingers deftly selecting the bottle. I couldn't help but

notice the way his eyes followed my every move, not lingering on the tattoos that snaked up my arms but instead staying focused, probing, as if trying to peel back the layers and uncover the memories I vowed to leave buried back in the Texas desert.

"Nice place you've got here," he remarked casually, as if we were two old friends catching up. "I hear the raspberry martini is quite the hit."

"Thanks," I said, keeping my tone neutral.

"Must have taken a lot of trial and error to perfect it," The man continued, leaning in ever so slightly, his dark eyes narrowing with a hint of something more than idle curiosity.

"Something like that," I managed, my grip on the shaker tightening as I handed him his drink.

He lifted the glass to his lips, keeping his gaze on me steady. "What's your secret?"

"It wouldn't be a secret anymore if I told you," I said, plastering a smile on my face. But as he drank, a shiver ran down my spine. The night at Sweet Cocktails suddenly seemed far longer, and the shadows in the corners of the room felt deeper than they had mere moments ago.

"Can't say I've seen you around here before," I said, my voice steady despite the thundering of my heart. "You a local?"

"Passing through," he replied, swirling his drink with a casual flick of his wrist. "Name's Burt. I've heard this place has the best martinis on the west coast."

"Whoever told you that wasn't lying," I shot back, tucking a stray lock of my long dark hair behind my ear and willing my hands not to tremble.

"Especially if they're made by Raya Kinkaid, from what I gather."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:43 am

"Word travels fast," I quipped, leaning against the bar, my fingers absently polishing a glass that didn't need cleaning. "Question is, why didn't you order one?"

The man's lips curved into a smile, reminding me of the slither of a rattlesnake.

"I preferred to check out the person responsible for everyone's guilty pleasure."

The hairs on the back of my arms bristled, and I cleared my throat.

"Please excuse me, I've got other customers."

"Of course," he said, but there was a weight to his words that lingered like the scent of heavy cologne in an empty room.

Turning to other patrons, I busied myself with orders and laughter, letting the rhythm of the bar soothe the unease that had settled in my chest. But every time I glanced back at Burt, there he sat, observing, waiting.

The night waned, and after last call, I tossed my apron aside and slipped out the back door into the alley. The cool air was a slap to my senses, and I welcomed it. I needed to clear my head, to shake the feeling of being watched.

"Raya Kinkaid," a voice echoed off the brick walls, sending a jolt through me.

Burt stepped out from the shadows, the dim light glinting off his badge. "FBI. I'm Agent Burt Stamford."

I stumbled backward, my hand searching for the wall to steady myself. "What do you want?"

"Let's talk about those raspberries you're using to make your martinis, shall we?" He advanced, each step measured and deliberate.

"Look, if this is about some health code violation..."

"Cut the crap, Raya." His tone was sharp now, no longer the playful banter from before. "I know about your little forays onto Evans' land. I'm also aware of your...colorful history in Texas."

My blood ran cold. "That's in the past. And what do you mean my forays onto Evans' land? What land are you talking about? Have you been following me?"

"Don't play dumb with me, little girl. Nothing stays buried forever," Burt said, and the threat in his voice was unmistakable. "But I'm willing to overlook certain indiscretions if you help me."

"Help you with what?" I asked, though I already dreaded the answer.

"Maxwell Evans," he replied. "Or at least that's what he's calling himself these days. He owns the private land on which you've been trespassing to collect your signature fruit."

"What?" I gasped, clutching a hand to my chest. "I've been trespassing? I didn't know, I swear! I discovered the raspberry bushes one day while hiking in the woods! I thought they were just growing wild!"

Burt chuckled and then spat onto the pavement. "Yeah, right. Even if you are telling the truth, no one would believe you once they learn who you really are."

“What do you want from me?” I asked, leaning back against the rough bricks, wishing they’d fall away to reveal some secret escape.

“Like I said,” Burt continued, “Maxwell Evans, the landowner. I know he wouldn’t be happy to learn that you’ve not only been sneaking onto his private property, but also making money off his fruit. Let’s just say there’s more to him than reclusive billionaire antics. The FBI has their finger on him, and I need someone on the inside.”

"Blackmail isn't my style," I retorted, but the resolve in my words faltered under the gravity of his proposal.

"It's not blackmail; it's an opportunity." Burt's eyes bore into me. "Get close to Evans. Find out what he's hiding. I want to know who's in his inner circle, who he does business with, where all his money really comes from. Get me the intel I want, and your secret stays safe."

"Or?"

"Or Sweet Cocktails loses its star bartender to a scandal. I suspect the media would have a feeding frenzy with what I know. Can't you just see your photo plastered all over the entertainment rags?"

"Dammit," I muttered under my breath. My mind raced, but the path forward was as clear as the gin in the bottles behind the bar.

"Fine," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "I'll do it."

"Smart choice." Burt's lips curled into a semblance of a smile. "Welcome to the game, Raya. It's going to be one hell of a ride."

I attempted a deep breath, willing myself to remain calm. I'd been through worse,

after all. But the alley was a cold slap of reality, the stench of garbage a stark contrast to the lingering scent of raspberries on my hands. Burt's words hung in the air like the low fog, chilling and omnipresent, a reminder that no matter how far I ran, my past would always be there like a hidden mine. One misstep was all it would take, and the beautiful new life I'd work so hard to create would go up in smoke.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:43 am

I wrapped my arms around myself, not just for warmth but as a shield against the vulnerability that threatened to spill over.

"An opportunity," Burt had called it, his voice echoing off the brick walls, mocking me with a choice that felt more like a chokehold. To get intel on Maxwell Evans—an elusive and potentially dangerous man—or watch my carefully constructed life crumble? My past was a Pandora's box I couldn't afford to open.

"Fine," I spat, lifting my chin to meet the secret service agent squarely in the eye. "But if I do this, it's on my terms. You keep your distance, and my past stays buried." The words were a lifeline I clung to, as if I had a semblance of control in a situation spiraling away from me.

"Of course," Burt replied smoothly with a smile that set off alarm bells in my head. But what choice did I have?

"And when this is over," I continued, taking a step forward, ready for this conversation to be over. "We're done. I give you what you want, and then you disappear from my life."

"Understood." His smile didn't reach his eyes. It never did with men like him.

As I turned to leave, my mind raced with plans and contingencies. I wasn't just Raya the bartender anymore; I was Raya the spy. A role I never auditioned for but one that had been thrust upon me. And if I wanted to survive, I'd have to play it better than I ever shook a martini. I'd need to be sharp, savvy, and seductive. This was a high-stakes game, one that could either free me from my past at last or entangle me further

in its thorny vines. I could do this; I had to believe that. For now, though, I had to push aside the gnawing fear tempting me to flee and never look back. Except then when would I ever be able to stop running? No, I'd come far enough, established a decent life here. California was my home now, and I was determined to stay. If they wanted a show, I'd give them one to remember.

"Game on, Maxwell Evans," I murmured to myself as I stepped out into the night, the lights of Sweet Cocktails beckoning me back to a world where I was in control. And I wasn't about to give that up easily.

Pushing open the door to the apartment I shared with Trina, I found her curled up on the couch, a tub of mint chocolate chip ice cream cradled in her lap like a consolation prize. The glow from the TV flickered across her tear-stained cheeks as she watched some Hallmark movie about second chances. Ironic.

"Hey," I said softly, shutting the door behind me with a quiet click.

"Raya," she sniffled, looking up at me with red-rimmed eyes. "Slade...he cheated on me. I found a bunch of texts on his phone. He's been seeing some gorgeous redhead behind my back. Sending her dick pics and all that." Her voice broke on the last word, and she dug the spoon into the gooey green swirl with more force than necessary.

"Ah, Trin, I'm sorry," I murmured, kicking off my shoes. I headed to the adjacent kitchen where I dumped my bag on the small island and grabbed a spoon from the drawer before joining her on the sofa. I scooped up a bite of the cold dessert and placed it into my mouth as she paused the movie and turned to look at me.

"Something's eating you too, girl. I can tell. What is it?"

I shook my head, trying to deflect. "Tonight's about you, okay?" I said, offering a smile I hoped was reassuring. "Don't worry about me. I can take care of myself."

She searched my face, knowing there was more I wasn't saying, but she nodded, pressing play again and scooting closer. We sat there, two women bearing separate burdens but at least there was solace in knowing we weren't entirely alone.

The spoon clinked against the bowl as Trina shoveled another heap of ice cream into her mouth, her eyes glued to the screen where love always found a way. I watched her for a moment, my own spoon idle between my fingers. My mind, though, was racing faster than the plot twists on the TV.

I'd slipped into this life at Sweet Cocktails like a shadow blending into the night, but now the stakes were changing. Maxwell Evans, the name alone had a weight to it, a power that seemed to reverberate through the very walls of the bar every Wednesday night. The whispers about him were laced with fear and admiration—gorgeous, untouchable, a man shrouded in mystery. I'd never met him before, but come next Wednesday, our worlds would collide for the first time. I'd never worked the Wednesday night shift before and had been surprised at finding my name on the schedule. Burt's handiwork, no doubt. He'd probably played my boss as well as me, maybe even threatened him with some of his own secrets for all I knew.

I chuckled dryly under my breath.

"Raya?" Trina's voice drew me back, and I realized I'd been staring into space. "You sure you're okay?"

"Sure," I lied smoothly. "Pass the ice cream."

Grabbing the container, I dipped my spoon in for another bite. I had heard Maxwell was guarded by his associates, a wall of muscle and silence that kept him insulated

from the patrons. They reserved the VIP room, a sanctuary within the already exclusive haven of Sweet Cocktails. It was his fortress, and come Wednesday, I'd be one of the few allowed in. Another server, Cheyenne, once confided that all he ever ordered was a single martini. I wondered how a single drink could ever be enough for a man like that. Perhaps it was a statement, a testament to his self-control, or maybe he was a man who enjoyed routine. Regardless, that martini was going to be my ticket in, my chance to catch his eye. I just had to make it irresistible, lace my raspberry concoction with an extra layer of intrigue.

A shiver ran down my spine—not entirely unpleasant—as I imagined that first meeting. Would he see through me, or would the charm that had saved my skin more times than I cared to count hold up against his penetrating eyes? The thought made my heart beat a staccato rhythm against my ribs.

"Wednesday," I whispered to myself, setting the spoon down, my appetite gone.

"Did you say something?" Trina asked, pausing the movie and wiping her eyes.

"Nothing important," I reassured her, mustering a smile. "Just thinking about work."

"Ugh, work," she groaned, playing the movie again. "Don't remind me. With how much I've been crying, I'm sure I'm gonna look like hell when I show up tomorrow."

"Just add extra eyeliner and no one will know the difference," I said with a wave of my hand. "Besides, you're gorgeous. Don't sell yourself short just because your man can't keep his dick in his pants. It has nothing to do with you."

Trina sighed and nestled back into the sofa cushions. "I guess. Thanks, Raya. I'm so glad you moved in with me after Lacey decided to up and get hitched to some dude she met in Vegas. I heard from her just today, in fact. She loves it there and they're trying for a baby."

“Wow, that’s awesome,” I said, nodding. I hadn’t met Lacey but felt certain that any of friend of Trina’s would be a friend of mine, too. Rising, I took the empty ice cream carton and our spoons into the kitchen, grounding myself in the here and now with the mundane task.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:43 am

"Will you be okay if I crash?" I asked after I'd cleaned up.

"Yeah," said Trina with a sigh. "I'm just gonna finish this show. Maybe I'll watch another one and let Hallmark lull me to sleep tonight with the idea that happy endings really do happen sometimes."

"They do," I said firmly. "We just have to hold onto our dreams and not let anyone get in the way of making them come true."

But as I walked down the hall to the bathroom, I hoped I could believe my own words. Somehow, I felt they were about to be put to the test more than ever.

Chapter Two

MAXWELL

Sweet Cocktails was exactly what the name suggested. The bar, nestled in the heart of Orange County, was an oasis of elegance and indulgence, drawing a crowd that appreciated both. To those who weren't in the know, it seemed like a typical upscale bar, but those who were familiar with it understood the nuances that set it apart.

The place had a certain aura, a blend of sophistication and secrecy, with just enough mystery to keep the thrill alive for people like me. From the outside, it seemed like just another posh hotspot, but within its walls, deals were made, alliances formed, and secrets kept.

Every Wednesday night at 10 p.m., I went there with my associates. It was a ritual

that provided both a break from my hectic schedule and a controlled environment for important discussions. The private VIP room, tucked away from prying eyes and curious ears, had become our sanctuary.

Inside the dimly lit room, I leaned back in one of the plush leather chairs and surveyed the setting. The ambiance was luxurious without being ostentatious, just the way I liked it. The soundproof walls muted the music outside, a steady thrum that seemed to vibrate through the room like an unspoken promise. I felt the beat resonate in my bones, a rhythm I knew by heart.

Alejandro Morales, my right-hand man, sat to my left, nursing a tumbler of whiskey. He was as steady as ever, his eyes constantly scanning the room even though there were no threats to be found here. Next to him were several men in my employment along with some close business connections. I was pleased to see all of them engaged in low conversation. These meetings were essential for maintaining the delicate balance of our operations and I intended that to continue.

Watching from my seat at the head of the table, I admired the ease with which my associates fell into their roles. Each of them had their own talents, and it was their combined expertise that allowed us to operate so smoothly. Their presence was comforting, a reminder that I wasn't alone in this world, even when it felt like I was.

As was my custom, I ordered a single martini. It was more of a formality than a desire, a signal that the night had begun. I usually paid little attention to the specifics of the drink. The quality here was consistent, and I had other matters on my mind.

Tonight, however, things were slightly different. Zayn Cole, the owner of Sweet Cocktails, had mentioned earlier in the week that he had a new bartender with a signature raspberry martini that was all the rage on social media. He was convinced I'd enjoy it.

The concoction didn't particularly interest me. I didn't care for trends or what people hyped up online. But Zayn had been good to us, keeping the VIP room private and the media out of our business. He was paid well for his discretion and had never disappointed. As a courtesy to him, I agreed to try this new drink.

"Zayn promised you'd love her raspberry martini," Alejandro reminded me, amusement in his voice.

I shot him a sidelong glance. "Zayn is a businessman," I said. "He knows how to sell a product."

Alejandro chuckled, raising his glass to me. "Fair enough."

When the door to the VIP room opened, I expected to see the usual servers. Instead, a striking woman walked in, holding a tray with my drink balanced perfectly. Her entrance was subtle yet commanding, and all eyes turned to her as she approached.

She moved with a grace that was both deliberate and effortless, like a dancer who knew every step by heart. Her dark hair cascaded over her shoulders, framing a face that was as captivating as it was familiar. I knew instantly where I had seen her before, not here at the bar, but on the security footage from my property.

Her beauty was undeniable, and there was an exotic allure to her that was hard to ignore. She was a vision of elegance and poise, a presence that demanded attention and stirred something deep within me. Her eyes, a captivating shade of hazel, met mine with a boldness that spoke of both confidence and intrigue.

I had known someone was picking raspberries from the bushes on my land. When one of my men brought the footage to me, I saw her there, moving among the plants with a grace that caught my attention. At the time, I dismissed her as harmless, perhaps someone who simply appreciated the fruit. But now, seeing her in person, I

realized there was perhaps there was more to her than met the eye. Was her presence tonight merely a coincidence? More than likely so; however, I was not in the habit of letting my guard down. I found the woman's allure tantalizing enough that she'd drawn my attention in any case.

She approached the table with confidence, her eyes locking onto mine as she set the martini down. There was a palpable tension in the air, a charged energy that crackled between us like electricity. Her presence filled the room, commanding attention and creating a sense of anticipation. Out of my peripheral vision, I noticed the heads of the men around me turn in our direction.

"Mr. Evans, I hope you enjoy the drink," she said, her voice steady, though I detected a hint of nervousness behind her polished exterior. Her words were measured, each syllable infused with a subtle sexuality that was impossible to ignore.

"Thank you..." I paused, letting the moment hang in the air like a suspenseful note. "Raya, isn't it?"

Her eyes flickered with surprise, but she quickly masked it with a professional smile. "Yes, Raya Kinkaid."

I leaned forward slightly, studying her. She was beautiful, no doubt about it, with an exotic quality that appealed to me. But it was more than just her appearance; there was an energy about her that piqued my curiosity. She was an enigma, a puzzle I wanted to solve.

"I've heard a lot about this raspberry martini," I said, lifting the glass to my lips. "It's become quite famous."

She inclined her head, a small, enigmatic smile playing on her lips. "I hope it lives up to the hype."

As I took a sip, the flavors unfolded in a cascade of complexity. Sweet, tart, and with an undercurrent that was both familiar and foreign. The drink was an unexpected delight, a testament to her skill and creativity.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:43 am

“It’s excellent,” I said, meeting her gaze. “In fact, I happen to have raspberry bushes growing on my property. Perhaps you’d like to see them for yourself?”

Her composure faltered for just a fraction of a second, but it was enough for me to see that she was genuinely surprised. She recovered quickly, her smile widening with genuine interest. “That sounds like a lovely idea, sir.”

“Maxwell,” I said. “Saturday night, then. I’ll have my staff serve you a drink for a change. You can relax and enjoy the sunset from my terrace. It’s quite the view.”

There was a momentary pause as she considered my offer, and I could see the wheels turning in her mind. It was clear she hadn’t anticipated this turn of events, but her willingness to adapt was impressive.

Alejandro shifted beside me, his brow furrowing slightly. He leaned over and whispered, “You sure about this, boss? We don’t need distractions right now. There’s important business that needs handling.”

I nodded slightly, acknowledging his concern. Alejandro was right; our current situation was precarious, and distractions could be costly. But there was something about Raya that intrigued me beyond mere curiosity. She wasn’t just a stunning woman; there was a story behind those eyes, and I intended to find out what it was.

Raya, meanwhile, navigated the room, engaging with my associates as if she belonged among us. It was impressive, watching her converse and respond to their questions and comments with laughter and smiles, even as Alejandro remained skeptical. I could see that she was doing her best to charm, and despite myself, I

found it hard not to be impressed. It was a skill I recognized and respected.

As the night progressed, my associates and I moved on to discuss business matters. Raya remained present but busied herself behind the bar and refilling our drinks as needed. She was good at this, playing the role of the attentive bartender.

After we concluded our meeting and I was escorted to the waiting Escalade idling at the curb, I found myself contemplating Raya Kinkaid. She was a complication, no doubt, and one that could prove dangerous if mishandled. But there was a certain allure to the challenge she presented, a mystery that begged to be unraveled. Perhaps she would be nothing more than a diversion, a temporary indulgence to provide respite from the pressures and responsibilities that weighed heavily on my shoulders these days. It had been some time since I had allowed myself the pleasure of a woman's company, and Raya was undeniably tempting.

Yet, I couldn't shake the feeling that there was more at stake here than a mere dalliance. Raya had come into my life at a pivotal moment, and her role was yet to be determined. Was she a threat, a pawn, or something entirely different?

The city lights blurred past the window, casting a kaleidoscope of colors across my face. The night was alive with possibilities, each moment teetering on the edge of revelation. I had built my life on calculated risks and strategic decisions, and this was no different.

I would find out exactly who Raya Kinkaid was, and what secrets she held. Until then, I would enjoy this little game until I could claim her as my own.

Chapter Three

RAYA

The days leading up to Saturday night had been a whirlwind of emotions and conflicting thoughts. Meeting Maxwell Evans in the VIP room at Sweet Cocktails had changed everything. His presence had been overwhelming, a magnetic force that drew me in even as every instinct screamed for me to stay away. I wasn't just playing with fire; I was diving headfirst into an inferno.

I couldn't deny the attraction I felt for him, but I had to remember my mission. Burt Stamford had made it clear that Maxwell was dangerous, and I wondered if he could be connected to a major drug cartel. Yet, the man I'd met at Sweet Cocktails was proving to be more than just a suspect. He was enigmatic, alluring, and guarded in a way that only heightened my curiosity. I remembered his gaze, heavy with intention, as I served him the raspberry martini that had made me somewhat of an urban legend. It was like he knew there was more to me than met the eye, as if he could see straight through the bartender facade to the woman on a dangerous quest for truth.

"Focus, Raya," I muttered to myself, shaking off the memory. He intrigued me, this man of shadows, with his dark skin and mysterious accent that danced around my curiosity. I couldn't quite place it, and that only added to the enigma. But tonight wasn't about indulging intrigue; it was about getting closer to whatever Maxwell was hiding behind those chocolate, knowing eyes. There was a softness in his eyes that contrasted sharply with his hardened exterior, making me wonder if there was more to him than what Burt had led me to believe. Or whether I was just being naïve, letting physical desire cloud my judgment. I'd learned to be smarter than that, and I wasn't about to let a man get the upper hand now.

I had to keep my head in the game. This wasn't just about me; it was about finding the truth. The fact that Maxwell was sending a car for me on Saturday night only added to the sense of increasing danger and resulting determination I felt with each passing day. When I received his text, my heart skipped a beat. The man knew where I lived—Of course, he did. A man like Maxwell Evans had the resources to find out anything he wanted, but the thought that he had taken the time to know this detail

made my pulse quicken with both excitement and fear.

As I stood in front of my closet, trying to decide what to wear, my thoughts were a jumbled mess. He'd mentioned showing me the raspberry bushes on his land—a sly smile tugged at my lips since of course I already knew exactly where they were. Or was he already aware of that and intending to taunt me with the knowledge? Or punish me? If that were the case, however, he could have turned me over to the authorities weeks ago. Instead, he'd invited me to join him for dinner. That meant there was more to it than that.

After what felt like an eternity, I settled on a summer dress. It was elegant and light, its hue somewhere between peach and pink that contrasted nicely with my olive complexion. It flowed gracefully around my legs, cinching at the waist to highlight my curves. I wanted to appear sophisticated but not too eager, like I was dressing up for myself, not for him. But as I caught a glimpse of my reflection, my gaze lingered on the snake tattoos winding up my arms. They were a reminder of the past I was trying so hard to leave behind. A past that had left me with scars, both visible and hidden.

For a moment, I considered leaving them uncovered, letting Maxwell see the real me on display. But then, the old insecurities crept in. These tattoos were a part of who I was, but they didn't fit the image I was trying to project tonight. With a sigh, I draped a light summer wrap over my shoulders, concealing the inked serpents beneath the fabric. It was a futile attempt, really—my scars ran much deeper than skin.

I was relieved that Trina was working the closing shift at the bar tonight and wouldn't be home to ask questions. The fewer people who knew about this, the better. I'd told her I had a date and not to wait up if I wasn't home by the time she finished her shift. The truth was, I had no idea what tonight would bring, and I didn't want to make any promises I couldn't keep.

When Maxwell's driver arrived promptly at 6 pm, I felt a flutter of nerves in my stomach. The man was enormous, towering over me even though I was wearing heels. He was dressed in a tailored suit and wore dark glasses, with an earpiece tucked discreetly into his ear. His expression was unreadable, and he spoke only a brief greeting as he opened the door of the black Escalade with blacked-out windows. The vehicle itself was imposing, its sleek exterior giving off an air of power and secrecy.

As I climbed inside, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was stepping into something far bigger than myself. The door closed behind me with a solid thud, sealing me inside the luxury of dark leather seats and soft lighting. The driver didn't say a word as we pulled away from my apartment building, the city lights fading into the distance as we drove toward the outskirts of Orange County.

The drive was smooth and silent, the kind of silence that leaves too much room for thoughts to run wild. I twisted my fingers together with nervous energy, trying to focus on the mission and reminding myself of the questions I needed to ask, the information I needed to gather. But all I could think about was Maxwell—his deep, melodic voice, the way his accent hinted at something foreign and exotic. It was a blend of something rich and rhythmic, perhaps Spanish with an undertone of something else and I wondered about his origins for the millionth time.

After what felt like an eternity, we arrived at the gates of Maxwell's estate. Tall, thick green hedges lined the perimeter, blocking any view of what lay beyond. The gates were imposing, made of wrought iron and flanked by security personnel who were armed and alert. As the driver rolled down his window, I noticed the high-tech security system, cameras tracking our every move, and the guards scanning our faces, their own devoid of expression. Everything about this place screamed wealth and power, but also a sense of isolation—a fortress to keep the outside world at bay.

The gates opened smoothly, and we drove up a long, winding driveway that cut

through manicured lawns and lush gardens. The mansion that came into view was breathtaking, an architectural masterpiece that looked more like a palace than a home. It was grand, with sprawling terraces and large windows that gleamed in the evening light. The circular drive in front of the entrance was lined with carefully pruned trees, their branches casting long shadows over the cobblestones.

The driver pulled to a stop, and I took a deep breath before stepping out of the car. My heart was racing, but I forced myself to remain calm, to keep the mask of confidence firmly in place. As I looked up, Maxwell was already there, standing at the top of the steps that led to the front door. He was dressed in light summer linen pants and an open shirt that accentuated his broad chest and muscular frame. Everything about him spoke of effortless elegance and supreme control, from the way he moved to the way he held my gaze.

“Raya,” he said with a smile, his voice sending a shiver of electricity down my spine. “You look lovely.”

“Thank you,” I replied, trying to keep my voice steady. “Your home is incredible.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:43 am

He descended the steps to meet me, taking my hand in his. The touch was brief but electrifying, and I was close enough to smell his spicy masculine scent that instantly ratcheted up the invisible heat between us. “I’m glad you could join me,” he said, his eyes never leaving mine.

The estate was even more magnificent up close, each detail meticulously crafted to exude both luxury and timelessness. The scents of jasmine and honeysuckle filled the air, and in the distance, I could hear the faint trickle of a bubbling fountain.

“I thought we’d start with a tour of the property,” Maxwell said, leading me down a stone path that wound through the gardens. “There’s something I’d like to show you.”

I nodded, trying to maintain my composure, even as the anticipation built inside me. It was impossible not to be captivated by the sheer opulence of the estate, but I had to remind myself that I wasn’t here to admire the scenery. I was here for a reason, and I couldn’t afford to lose sight of that.

As we walked, the sound of hooves clattering against stone drew my attention. I turned to see an open carriage being drawn by two magnificent horses. The carriage was elegant, with polished wood and brass accents, and it seemed like something out of a fairy tale.

Maxwell turned to me, his smile widening as he took in my expression of surprise. “I thought we’d take a ride through the fields,” he said. “It’s a beautiful evening, and the view is even better from the carriage.”

A female server dressed in a starched white shirt, black slacks, and low heels

appeared with two glasses of wine, which we accepted before climbing into the carriage. The seat was plush and comfortable, and as the horses began to move, I felt a thrill of excitement. The evening air was warm and there was a light breeze, the perfect setting for what felt like a scene from a movie.

Maxwell sat close beside me, his presence both comforting and intimidating. The carriage ride gave us the perfect opportunity to engage in conversation, but I knew I had to be careful with my words. This was my chance to gather information, but Maxwell was no fool. He would see through any attempt to pry too deeply, so I had to tread lightly.

“So, tell me, Maxwell,” I began, swirling the wine in my glass. “Where are you from? Your accent..it’s intriguing. I can’t quite place it.”

He smiled, taking a sip of his wine before responding. “I’ve lived in many places,” he said, his tone deliberately vague. “But I spent a good portion of my childhood in the Dominican Republic. My mother was Dominican, and my father was Nigerian. I suppose that’s where my accent comes from—a blend of cultures.”

The revelation caught me off guard, and I found myself even more fascinated by him. He was a man of many layers, each one more intriguing than the last. But I couldn’t let myself get too caught up in his charm. I had to stay focused.

“And you, Raya?” he asked, turning the conversation back to me. “What brought you to Orange County?”

I hesitated, choosing my words carefully. “I needed a fresh start,” I said, keeping my voice light. “Texas wasn’t exactly the place for me anymore.”

He raised an eyebrow, clearly curious, but he didn’t press further. Instead, he took another sip of his wine, his gaze drifting out over the fields as we rode along. “A

fresh start,” he murmured, almost to himself. “Sometimes, that’s exactly what we need.”

The conversation continued, a dance of words and subtle deflections. We both answered just enough to keep the other interested, but not enough to reveal too much. It was a battle of wits, and I found myself enjoying it more than I expected. There was something thrilling about matching my mind against his, even as the sexual tension between us simmered just beneath the surface.

As the sun began to set, casting the sky in ribbons of orange and pink, we returned to the estate. Maxwell led me along a winding landscaped path and series of short staircases that wrapped around the main house to a terrace along the back of the property. The architecture seemed to blend the finest luxury with the raw beauty of nature seamlessly. The floor beneath my feet was cool, smooth stone, polished to a soft sheen. Beyond the terrace lay an infinity pool, its surface shimmering like liquid glass. The water spilled over the edge, giving the illusion that it flowed straight into the canyon below. The view was breathtaking—stark cliffs and rugged landscape bathed in the golden light of the setting sun.

In the center of the terrace was a small table set for two, intimate and elegant. The tablecloth was white, crisp, and pristine, with a lace trim that fluttered lightly in the breeze. A simple centerpiece of deep red and purple flowers sat in the middle, their scent just barely noticeable, adding a touch of sweetness to the air. The place settings were impeccable—fine china edged in gold, silverware perfectly aligned, and crystal glasses that sparkled in the fading sunlight.

Maxwell pulled out my chair for me, his hand resting on the back of it for just a moment longer than necessary as I sat down. I could feel his presence, close and warm, and my pulse quickened. There was something about the way he moved, a graceful confidence that made me feel both drawn to him and wary all at once.

As soon as I settled into my seat, a server appeared, dressed in a sharp black suit, moving with a precision that spoke of years of experience. He set down the first course in front of us—a foie gras terrine with a slice of toasted brioche and fig chutney on the side. The dish looked almost too beautiful to eat, but as I took my first bite, the richness of the foie gras, balanced by the sweetness of the figs, melted in my mouth. The flavors were decadent, sophisticated—a perfect start to the meal. I'd never eaten like this before, and the experience tantalized my senses in a way I'd never known was possible.

The server returned with the second course, seared scallops resting on a bed of creamy cauliflower puree, drizzled with truffle oil. The scallops were cooked perfectly, their golden-brown crust giving way to a tender, buttery interior that practically dissolved on my tongue. The earthiness of the truffle oil added depth to the dish, making each bite more luxurious than the last.

For the main course, they brought out a perfectly grilled filet mignon, drizzled with a rich red wine reduction and served with roasted baby vegetables and a creamy potato gratin. The steak was so tender that I barely had to use my knife to cut it, the flavor so intense that I savored every bite. I could feel Maxwell watching me as I ate, his eyes dark and intense, like he was trying to read my thoughts, to uncover whatever secrets I might be hiding.

As we dined, the sun dipped lower in the sky, turning the canyon into a canvas of amber and rose. Maxwell poured us both a glass of deep red wine, its aroma rich with dark fruit and spice, perfectly complementing the meal. Everything about this dinner—the setting, the food, the wine—was designed to impress, and to disarm. I'd been planted in another world, one where luxury and indulgence were the norm. It would be all too easy to be swept away in the dream if I wasn't careful. This dinner was more than just a meal. It was a test, a game, and Maxwell was playing it masterfully. I just hoped I could keep up.

I excused myself to go to the bathroom, and a sense of unease settled over me. I couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to this evening than what Maxwell was showing me. And as I made my way down the dimly lit hallway, that feeling only grew stronger.

It was then that I noticed something strange—a loose floorboard near the base of the wall. At first, I hesitated, glancing around to make sure no one was watching. But the curiosity was too strong to ignore. I crouched down, carefully prying the board up with my fingers, revealing a hidden compartment beneath. My heart pounded as I reached inside, pulling out a small key.

There was a door nearby, one I hadn't noticed before. It was almost hidden in the shadows, blending seamlessly with the wall. With trembling hands, I tried the key in the lock. It turned easily, the door creaking open to reveal a narrow staircase leading down into darkness.

I knew I shouldn't go down there. Every instinct was telling me to turn back, to leave this alone. But the need to know, to find out what Maxwell was hiding, was too strong. I took a deep breath and descended the stairs, each step echoing in the confined space.

At the bottom, I found myself in a small, dimly lit room. The air was cool and slightly musty, the scent of old books filling my nostrils. Shelves lined the walls, filled with documents, photographs, and other items that seemed out of place in a mansion like this. I moved cautiously, my eyes scanning the contents for anything that might give me a clue about Maxwell's true nature.

There were ledgers with numbers I couldn't quite make sense of, photographs of people I didn't recognize, and maps marked with locations that seemed random at first glance. But as I pieced it together, a pattern began to emerge. These were more than just random items—they were pieces of a puzzle, one that hinted at something

much larger and more dangerous than I had anticipated. I wished I had my phone, but it was back at the table in my clutch. I was kicking myself for leaving it behind. I couldn't take pictures, couldn't document what I was seeing. All I could do was try to remember as much as possible, to commit every detail to memory.

As I sifted through the papers, I lost track of time. The sound of distant footsteps brought me back to reality, the noise growing closer with each passing second. Panic surged through me as I realized someone was coming. I had to get out of here, but the room was small, with no obvious place to hide.

Thinking quickly, I ducked behind a bookshelf, pressing myself against the wall as tightly as possible. The footsteps grew louder, and I held my breath, praying that whoever it was wouldn't find me.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:43 am

The door creaked open, and I peered through a small gap between the books. It was Alejandro, who I remembered from Sweet Cocktails as Maxwell's right-hand man. He was scanning the room, his eyes sharp and calculating. For a moment, I thought he might have seen me, but then he turned away, moving to inspect something on the other side of the room.

My heart was pounding so hard I was afraid he would hear it. I had to get out of here before he found me. But I couldn't move, couldn't risk making a sound. I watched in terror as Alejandro moved about the room, seemingly oblivious to my presence.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, he turned and left, closing the door behind him. I waited a few more seconds, just to be sure, before slipping out from behind the bookshelf. My hands were shaking as I carefully retraced my steps, making sure to leave no trace of my presence.

When I emerged back into the hallway, I took a moment to compose myself. My heart was still racing, and I could feel the adrenaline coursing through my veins. I knew I had been incredibly lucky, but I couldn't let my guard down. I had to be more careful from now on.

As I made my way back to the terrace, I couldn't help but reflect on what had just happened. I had uncovered something, but I wasn't sure what it all meant yet. There were pieces of the puzzle, but they were still too scattered to form a clear picture. But one thing was certain—Maxwell was hiding something, and I was more determined than ever to find out what it was.

I rejoined Maxwell at the table, hoping he wouldn't notice the change in my

demeanor. As I sat down, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was playing a dangerous game, one that could end very badly if I wasn't careful. But despite the risks, I couldn't walk away now. I was in too deep, and there was no turning back.

Chapter Four

MAXWELL

I stood on the terrace, watching Raya as she excused herself to use the bathroom, her figure retreating into the dimly lit house. The night was perfect, the kind of night that made you believe anything was possible. The canyon stretched out before me, a vast expanse of shadows and light, the infinity pool merging seamlessly with the horizon. The setting was ideal—luxurious, serene, and peaceful. I had crafted it that way, a reflection of the life I had made for myself out of the storm of my past. This estate was more than just a home; it was a fortress, a symbol of everything I had achieved and a testament to the power that lay within if one was only brave enough to wield it. The journey to get here hadn't been easy. It had come at great risk, requiring enormous sacrifice and unwavering commitment. Now looking out over the canyon, I knew I should be proud of what I had accomplished. Not many men could do all that I have done, after all. And yet loneliness still pricked my heart like the thorns of a rosebush. Yes, I was living life on my terms, but at what cost did this freedom come if I had no one to share it with?

My thoughts drifted back to Raya, the woman who had so unexpectedly captivated my attention. She was unlike any other woman I had met—intelligent, sharp, and disarmingly beautiful. There was a fire in her eyes that intrigued me, a challenge that I found irresistible. She was more than just a pretty face; she was my equal in many ways. But there was something about her that felt...off. She was hiding something, that much was clear. It made her all the more captivating, but also dangerous.

When she returned to the terrace, the sun had dipped low, casting the last of its

golden light over the canyon. The sky was deepening into twilight, the first stars beginning to twinkle overhead. Raya sat back down at the table, her movements graceful, her eyes meeting mine with a mixture of curiosity and something else—something darker, more elusive.

“It’s a beautiful night,” I said, my voice low and deliberate. “I was thinking we could take the rest of the wine down to the pool. Maybe dip our feet into the water. What do you think?”

She hesitated for just a moment, a flicker of something in her eyes—nervousness, perhaps?—before she nodded, a small, almost shy smile playing on her lips. “That sounds nice.”

I poured us each another glass, then led the way down the stone steps toward the pool. The water was like a mirror, reflecting the darkening sky and the distant lights of the city beyond. It was quiet, the kind of quiet that heightened the senses, made every sound, every movement more pronounced.

Raya followed me to the edge of the pool, her heels clicking softly on the stone. She looked out at the water, then back at me, her dark eyes full of something I couldn’t quite place—anticipation, perhaps, or maybe a hint of challenge. I watched as she slowly undid the strap of her dress, letting it slip down her shoulders. She hesitated again, as if weighing the decision, before she allowed the dress to fall to the ground, revealing a lacy black bra and matching panties that clung to her curves.

I felt a surge of heat, desire mingling with the thrill of the unknown. She was a vision, standing there under the fading light, the lines of her tattoos winding up her arms like serpents. I unbuttoned my shirt, pulling it off and letting it drop beside her dress. Her eyes flicked over me, lingering on my chest, floating over my arms, as I undid my belt and let my pants fall to the ground.

We stepped into the pool together, the water cool against my heated skin. It was a strange contrast, the soothing chill of the water and the electric tension between us. I moved closer to her, my hands finding her waist, pulling her toward me. She didn't resist, her body fitting perfectly against mine, the thin barrier of fabric between us doing little to dampen the heat that was building.

She wrapped her arms around my neck, her fingers playing with the hair at the nape, as I ran my hands down her back, tracing the lines of her tattoos. Her skin was smooth, warm, and I could feel the faintest shiver run through her as my fingers brushed the curve of her spine.

"Your tattoos," I murmured, my lips close to her ear. "They're intriguing. What's the story behind them?"

She leaned back slightly, just enough to look into my eyes, her gaze steady but guarded. "I'm from Texas," she said softly, her voice carrying a hint of something more—a challenge, perhaps. "Where rattlesnakes lie hidden in the grass."

Her words were layered with meaning, and I knew she wasn't just talking about the tattoos. There was something deeper there, something she wasn't ready to reveal. But that was fine. I had time. And I was willing to wait.

"Rattlesnakes, hmm?" I ran my hands up her sides, feeling the way her body responded to my touch. "I think there's more to the story than that."

"Maybe," she said, her tone teasing, but there was a seriousness in her eyes, a reminder that she wasn't just some toy for me to play with. She was sharp, dangerous in her own way, and I liked that.

I moved my hand to the back of her head, tangling my fingers in her hair, and pulled her closer, our lips inches apart. She didn't pull away, her breath warm against my

skin, her eyes locked on mine. The tension between us was thick, palpable, and I could feel her heart beating against my chest.

When I kissed her, it was slow, deliberate, a test to see how far she was willing to go. Her lips were soft, pliant, but there was a fierceness behind the kiss, a hunger that matched my own. I deepened the kiss, pulling her tighter against me, feeling the way her body pressed against mine, every curve fitting perfectly.

We moved together in the water, the coolness of the pool doing little to quench the heat between us. I could feel her hands on my back, her nails digging into my skin as I kissed her neck, trailing my lips down to her collarbone. She arched against me, a soft moan escaping her lips as I slid my hands under the waistband of her panties, pulling them down.

She reached for the clasp of her bra, her movements hurried, almost desperate, as she let it fall into the water, her bare skin pressing against mine. The sensation was intoxicating, her warmth, her softness, the way her breath hitched every time my hands moved over her skin.

We sank deeper into the water, our bodies entwined, moving together with a rhythm that was primal, instinctual. Every touch, every kiss, every gasp of breath was a step closer to the edge, a dance that we were both eager to lose ourselves in.

The water lapped gently against us, the only sound in the stillness of the night, as I slid my hands down her hips, lifting her slightly, guiding her legs around my waist. She wrapped them tightly around me, her nails digging into my shoulders as I pressed my hard cock into her, a low growl escaping my throat.

She gasped, her head falling back, exposing the long line of her neck. I kissed it, nipping at the skin, feeling her shudder against me. The pleasure was intense, almost overwhelming, the sensation of her body tightening around mine, the way she moved

against me, meeting every thrust with equal fervor.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:43 am

It was a dance of power, control, and surrender, each of us giving as much as we took, neither willing to back down. I could feel the tension building, the heat rising, until it was almost too much to bear. And then, in a rush of sensation, we both shattered, the world dissolving around us in a haze of pleasure.

We stayed like that for a moment, our breathing heavy, our bodies still entwined, the water gently rocking us. It was a moment of vulnerability, something I hadn't allowed myself to feel in a long time. But with Raya, it felt...right. As if she was meant to be here, in this moment, with me.

Slowly, we untangled ourselves, the coolness of the water a stark contrast to the heat that still lingered between us. We moved to the edge of the pool, pulling ourselves out, the night air cool against my damp skin.

I reached for a towel, wrapping it around her shoulders, my fingers brushing against her skin. She looked up at me, her eyes searching mine, as if trying to understand what had just happened, what it meant.

"I'll have my driver take you home," I said quietly, my voice still rough from the intensity of what we'd just shared. "But I'll see you again at Sweet Cocktails on Wednesday. After business is done, I'll bring you back here. You'll stay with me."

Her eyes widened slightly, surprise flickering across her face, but she nodded. "I'd like that."

I watched her as she dressed, her movements slow, almost hesitant, as if she was still processing everything that had happened. But there was something else in her eyes

now—a curiosity, a spark that told me she was intrigued, just as I was.

As she slid into the back seat of the Escalade, I watched her go, a small smile playing on my lips. This woman intrigued me, challenged me in ways I hadn't expected. But there was also a part of me that was wary, that recognized the danger she might pose. She was a snake, lying in wait, or a curious cat poking around where she didn't belong. Either way, she was in my world now, and I intended to keep a close eye on her.

Later, I stood in front of my bedroom mirror, toweling off the last remnants of pool water from my skin. The night had taken an unexpected turn, one that left me both satisfied and uneasy. I couldn't stop thinking about Raya, the way she had fit against me, the fire in her eyes that mirrored the intensity of our connection. She was different, special in a way I hadn't encountered before. But that difference also made her dangerous. I'd kept up my part of the bargain with the ones who had helped me. But that didn't mean I no longer had a target on my back. Was I willing to risk everything now for a woman?

Sighing, I slipped into a pair of silk boxers and reached for a glass of bourbon, letting the liquid burn its way down my throat. It was late, and I should have been getting ready for bed, but there was a restlessness in me that wouldn't let go. Maybe it was Raya, or maybe it was the way she had stepped into my world with such ease, as if she belonged there. Or maybe it was something more, a nagging feeling that a game was afoot that was quickly getting beyond my control.

I was just about to turn in for the night when a knock came at the door. It was firm, urgent, not the kind of knock that could wait until morning. I frowned, setting my glass down on the nightstand. There were few people who would dare disturb me at this hour, and fewer still who had a reason to.

I opened the door to find Alejandro standing there, his expression serious, the lines of worry etched into his dark face. Alejandro was not a man who scared easily, but tonight, there was something in his eyes that gave me pause.

“Security alerted me to a problem,” he said without preamble. “You need to see the footage.”

A cold knot formed in the pit of my stomach. Nodding, I pulled on a robe and followed him down the hall to the state-of-the-art security center I had installed on the property. The estate was equipped with the latest technology, and nothing happened here without my knowing about it.

The security attendant was waiting for us, his face a mask of professionalism, though I could see the tension in the set of his shoulders. Alejandro looked at me, a question in his eyes, but I simply nodded, my mind already racing with possibilities.

“Play it,” I said, my voice calm but firm.

The attendant pressed a few buttons, and the screen in front of us flickered to life. I leaned forward, steepling my fingers as I watched the footage roll. It showed the inside of the house, specifically the hallway that led to my private office—a place that was supposed to be off-limits to everyone but a select few.

And then, there she was. Raya. Her slim figure moved cautiously, her head turning from side to side as if she was checking to make sure she wasn’t being watched. She paused at the door to my office, her hand hovering over the handle. My heart thudded in my chest as I watched her push the door open and slip inside.

“Well, well, well,” I murmured, more to myself than anyone else. “Look what we have here. A curious kitten.”

The footage continued, showing Raya as she moved around my office, her hands skimming over papers, books, anything she could get her hands on. She was thorough, methodical, but there was also a sense of urgency in her movements. She knew she was running out of time.

I leaned back in my chair, my mind whirring with possibilities. What was she looking for? Information, obviously, but about what? And more importantly, who had sent her? My eyes narrowed as I watched her return everything to its original place, her movements careful, almost reverent, as if she was afraid of being caught. She was good, but not good enough.

Alejandro turned to me, his expression unreadable. “Do you want me to take care of her, boss?”

I considered his offer for a moment, the words hanging in the air between us. It would have been easy, too easy, to simply eliminate the problem. Raya was a threat, that much was clear, and I had dealt with threats before in far less pleasant ways. But something stopped me, a feeling in the back of my mind that told me this wasn’t the right move.

“No,” I said finally, my voice cold and calculating. “I’ll handle it.”

Alejandro gave a short nod, his face impassive. He knew better than to question me when I made a decision, but I could see the doubt in his eyes. He didn’t like this, and neither did I, but there was something about Raya that made me hesitate.

As I watched the last of the footage, the screen going black as Raya slipped out of my office, I couldn’t help but wonder what her next move would be. She had to know that what she had already done could very well cost her life. But she had taken the risk anyway, and that made her all the more intriguing.

I left the security center and returned to my bedroom. As I lay in bed, the events of the night replayed in my mind. The way Raya's body had responded to mine, the look in her eyes as we moved together in the pool, the way she had snuck into my office, thinking she was unseen. She didn't realize just how deep the waters she was treading in were, but I would make sure she did soon enough. Yes, I would handle Raya in my own way, make her purr, and keep her close. For now, I would let her think she was in control, but the truth was, I was the one holding all the cards. And when the time came, I would make sure she knew just how dangerous it was to play with fire.

Chapter Five

RAYA

Page 9

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:43 am

The moment I saw Johnny Gabino step into Sweet Cocktails, my heart plummeted to the floor. My hands trembled as I tried to pour a drink for a customer, the liquid sloshing over the edge of the glass. I muttered an apology, wiping the counter down with shaky hands, but my eyes kept darting back to him.

Johnny was the one person I never thought I'd see again, the one person I'd hoped I'd left behind for good. But there he was, leaning against the bar, looking at me with that same twisted grin he always had. He was taller than I remembered, leaner too, but the dangerous edge was still there, etched into every line of his face.

I felt sick to my stomach. All the memories came flooding back—the drugs, the nights I can barely remember, the way he used to control me, manipulate me, like I was his personal puppet. He'd promised me the world, but instead, he'd dragged me down into the depths of hell. And now, after all this time, after everything I'd done to get away from him, he was here, in the one place where I thought I was safe.

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. I needed to get out of there, needed to get away from him before he ruined everything. I mumbled something to Zayn about taking a break, not even waiting for his reply before I slipped out from behind the bar and headed for the back door.

The alley behind Sweet Cocktails was dimly lit, the shadows long and ominous. The air was thick with the smell of garbage and stale beer, but I didn't care. I just needed to get away, to catch my breath and figure out what the hell I was going to do. I leaned against the brick wall, my chest heaving as I tried to calm down, but it was no use. The panic was clawing at me, tightening its grip around my throat.

“Raya.”

His voice was smooth, too smooth, and it sent a shiver down my spine. I looked up, and there he was, standing at the end of the alley, his hands stuffed in the pockets of his leather jacket. He looked just as dangerous as he always had, his eyes glinting with something dark and sinister.

I forced myself to stand up straight, to face him head-on even though I wanted nothing more than to run. “What are you doing here, Johnny? How did you find me?”

He sauntered toward me, his grin widening to reveal a new gold-capped tooth as he closed the distance between us. “Wouldn’t you like to know? It wasn’t easy, but I’m glad I did. I’ve been looking for you, Princess. You didn’t think you could just disappear, did you?”

My heart was racing, my mind spinning as I tried to figure out what to do. Johnny was dangerous, more dangerous than anyone else I’d ever known, and now he was here, in my life again, threatening to ruin everything. “What do you want, Johnny? Why are you here?”

He stopped a few feet away from me, his eyes raking over me in a way that made my skin crawl. “I want what you owe me, Raya. You think you can just walk away from everything we had? From everything I did for you?”

My blood ran cold. I knew exactly what he was talking about—things I’d done that I’d tried so hard to leave behind. If that got out, if Maxwell found out...I couldn’t even think about what that would mean. It would destroy everything.

“I don’t owe you anything,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady, but I could hear the tremor in it. “You ruined my life, Johnny. I’m done with you.”

His grin faded, replaced by a sneer. “Ruined your life? I made you, Raya. You’d be nothing without me.”

I swallowed hard, my mouth suddenly dry. “I’d be better off without you. I am better off without you.”

He took another step closer, crowding me against the wall. His hand came up to brush a strand of hair from my face, and I flinched at the touch, disgust curling in my stomach. “Is that what you think? You think you’re better off? You think you can just run away and start over, like none of it ever happened?”

I stared at him, refusing to let the tears prickling at the corners of my eyes fall. “I did start over, Johnny. You’re not part of my life anymore.”

His hand moved to my throat, not squeezing, but the threat was there. I could feel his breath on my skin, and it took everything in me not to shrink away. “You’re never going to be free of me, Raya. You belong to me, and I’m here to collect.”

My heart pounded in my chest, my pulse racing as his words sank in. “What do you want from me?”

He leaned in, his lips brushing against my ear as he whispered, “Money, Raya. You’re going to give me money, or I’ll make sure everyone knows exactly who you are and what you’ve done.”

My blood ran cold. I knew exactly what he was talking about—the drugs, the prostitution, everything I’d tried so hard to leave behind.

“I don’t have any money,” I said, my voice shaking despite my efforts to stay calm.

“You’ll find it,” he hissed, his hand tightening on my throat just enough to make me

gasp. “You’ll bring it to me tomorrow night. There’s a motel on Fifth, room 212. Be there at six with the cash, or I’ll blow your whole new life to hell. Remember you’re nothing but a whore deep down, Princess, and that’s all you’ll ever be.”

He stepped back, releasing me, and I nearly collapsed against the wall. He gave me one last look, a twisted grin on his face, before turning and walking away, leaving me shaking in the alley.

I stood there for what felt like an eternity, trying to get my breathing under control, trying to process what had just happened. I couldn’t believe Johnny had found me, couldn’t believe he was here, threatening to destroy everything I’d built. But I knew Johnny well enough to know he wasn’t bluffing. If I didn’t do what he said, he’d go straight to the press, and my past would be splashed across every headline.

I couldn’t let that happen. I couldn’t let Maxwell find out. I didn’t know what was happening between us, but I felt as though I wanted to hide it, protect it like the delicate bud of a flower, until I could see which way it grew.

The thought of Maxwell sent a fresh wave of panic through me. What if Johnny was already planning something? What if he was watching me, waiting for the perfect moment to strike? I couldn’t just sit back and let him take everything from me again. I had to do something. I had to find a way to protect myself.

My mind raced as I considered my options. I couldn’t go to the police—not with my record. And I definitely couldn’t tell Maxwell. That would only make things worse. The only person who might be able to help was Burt Stamford.

I didn’t trust Burt, not really. He was using me just as much as Johnny had, and I knew that. But right now, he was my only shot at getting out of this mess. He had connections, resources. Maybe he could help me deal with Johnny, make him go away for good.

With a deep breath, I straightened up and headed back inside. I couldn't afford to lose my cool, not here, not now. I had to keep it together until I could figure out my next move.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:43 am

The rest of my shift passed in a blur, my mind elsewhere as I went through the motions of serving drinks and pretending everything was fine. But inside, I was falling apart, the weight of Johnny's threats pressing down on me like a vise.

As soon as I was off, I texted Burt and got the thumbs-up to pay him a visit at his temporary worksite. After receiving the address, I made a beeline for my car, my heart pounding as I fumbled with my keys. I needed to talk to Burt, needed to tell him about Maxwell's secret office, about everything I'd seen. Maybe if I could prove to him that I was still valuable, that I was still useful, he'd help me with Johnny. Maybe he'd protect me. And then I could figure out what to do about Maxwell after that.

The drive to the nondescript building where Burt's temporary office was located felt like it took forever. My hands were shaking as I parked and made my way inside, my mind racing with a million different thoughts. What if Burt couldn't help me? What if he turned me away? I didn't know what I would do then. I was running out of options, running out of time.

When I finally reached the suite, I knocked on the door, trying to steady my breathing. A moment later, the door swung open, and the smooth-talking agent stood there, looking as calm and composed as ever.

"Raya," he said, his voice low and measured. "Come in."

I stepped inside, feeling the chill of the sterile, windowless room. Burt's makeshift desk was cluttered with papers and folders. An open laptop sat on top, its screensaver displaying colorful bubbles that floated across a black background as though a child had just blown them from a fairy wand. He gestured for me to sit, and I did, my

nerves on edge.

“What brings you here tonight?” he asked, settling into his chair and leaning back, his sharp eyes studying me.

“I found something,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. “In Maxwell’s estate. A secret office. There were documents, photos, all kinds of things. I couldn’t get pictures, but I saw it all.”

Burt’s eyes narrowed, a flicker of interest passing over his face, and he scratched the stubble on his chin. “A secret office, you say? Interesting. Tell me more.”

I hesitated, trying to remember everything I’d seen. “There were files, documents with names and numbers. It looked like some kind of ledger. There were photos too—of people, places. I couldn’t make sense of all of it, to tell you the truth.”

Burt leaned forward, his fingers steepled in front of him. “And you didn’t get any camera shots?”

“No,” I admitted, shame creeping into my voice. “I didn’t have my phone with me.”

Burt studied me for a long moment, and I could feel his disappointment, even though he didn’t say anything. Finally, he nodded, a small smile playing on his lips. “You did well, Raya. Very well. This is valuable information. We’ll look into it.”

Relief flooded through me, but it was short-lived. I still had to deal with Johnny, and I didn’t know how to bring it up to Burt without sounding desperate.

“Burt,” I began, my voice hesitant. “There’s something else. Something personal.”

He raised an eyebrow. “What is it?”

I swallowed hard, trying to find the right words. “My ex-boyfriend, Johnny Gabino, he found me. He showed up at Sweet Cocktails tonight. He’s threatening to go to the press, to expose my past unless I give him money.”

Burt’s expression hardened, and I could see the wheels turning in his mind. “Johnny’s in town? That wasn’t part of the deal.”

I gasped. “What deal? Wait, was he the one who told you about me?”

Burt glanced away briefly before meeting my eyes again. “I had to know who you were to make sure you’d cooperate with our mission. But showing up was against the rules.”

I nodded, my throat tight. “I don’t know what to do. I can’t let him ruin everything I’ve worked for. I can’t let him go to the press.”

Burt was silent for a moment, his eyes narrowing as he considered my words. Finally, he nodded. “I’ll see what I can do. But remember, Raya, Maxwell is no fool, and neither is Johnny. You need to be careful. Very careful.”

I nodded, the weight of his words settling over me like a heavy blanket. I knew he was right. I was in way over my head, and if I wasn’t careful, I was going to drown.

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

Burt leaned back in his chair, his eyes never leaving mine. “Good. Now go home, get some rest. We’ll deal with Johnny, and we’ll keep an eye on Maxwell. But you need to stay focused, Raya. Don’t let your emotions get the better of you.”

I nodded again, feeling a mix of relief and dread. I was grateful for the FBI agent’s help, but I knew that this was far from over. Johnny was still out there, lurking, and

Maxwell...Maxwell was a whole other problem. One I was no longer sure I could handle.

The next morning, I woke up with a heavy sense of dread, knowing I had to face the reality of what had happened the night before. I'd hardly slept, my mind racing with thoughts of Johnny, Burt, and Maxwell.

I forced myself to get out of bed, dragging my feet as I made my way to the bathroom. I turned on the TV in my bedroom, hoping the background noise would distract me from my thoughts. But as I was brushing my teeth, something on the news caught my attention.

“...a fatal accident on Highway 13 late last night. Authorities say a vehicle drove off a cliff into a ravine, the driver pronounced dead on impact. The victim has been identified as John Gabino from Texas...”

Page 11

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:43 am

The toothbrush slipped from my hand, clattering into the sink as I stared at the screen in shock. My heart was pounding in my chest, my mind struggling to process what I'd just heard.

Johnny was dead.

The man who had terrorized me for years, who had shown up in my life out of nowhere, threatening me...was gone. Just like that.

My initial reaction was relief—pure, unadulterated relief that I wouldn't have to deal with him anymore, that he couldn't hurt me or destroy my new life. But that relief was quickly followed by something else, something darker and more confusing.

Burt had promised me he would handle Johnny, and now Johnny was dead. Had Burt done something? Had he and the FBI arranged the accident to get rid of him? Or had he acted alone, without the FBI's involvement? The thought made my stomach turn. I didn't want to believe it, but I also didn't know how far he was willing to go, how much he was willing to risk to protect me—or to protect his own interests.

As I stood there, staring at the news report, I realized that the lines between good and bad, right and wrong, were starting to blur. I wasn't sure which side I was on anymore, or if there even was a side. All I knew was that I was in way over my head, and the only thing I could do was try to keep my head above water for as long as possible.

I barely heard Trina come out of her room. Her eyes flicked from the TV screen to my face, her brow furrowing in concern. "What, did you know that guy?"

The knot in my chest tightened, and I could feel tears welling up in my eyes. I didn't even have the strength to nod. I just whispered, "Yes."

My voice broke, and the tears I'd been holding back spilled over. Before I could stop myself, I was sobbing, hands trembling as I tried to wrap my head around everything. "I've gotten in too deep, Trina. I don't know what to do. I don't know who to trust."

Trina's eyes widened, and in an instant, she was by my side, wrapping me in a tight hug. "Talk to me, Raya. What the hell is going on?"

I felt her warmth, her concern, but it just made me feel guiltier. I pulled back enough to look at her, my vision blurry with tears. "That was Johnny," I choked out.

Trina gasped, her blue eyes going wide with shock. "You mean the guy who took advantage of you back in Texas? The one who claimed he was your boyfriend but then got you hooked on drugs and started pimping you out?"

I nodded, the memories flooding back—Johnny's sly smile, his promises, the way he made me believe I was special before dragging me down into a pit of darkness. "Yeah...He showed up at the bar and threatened me, Tri. And now he's dead."

Trina's face paled. "And you don't think it was an accident?"

I shook my head slowly, trying to make sense of the chaos swirling in my mind. Taking a deep breath, I forced the words out. "There's something I haven't told you...Remember that night at the bar when the man in the dark suit started chatting me up? He's an FBI agent. He's blackmailing me to spy on Maxwell Evans."

Trina's jaw dropped. "What? Maxwell Evans? That's the guy you were out with the other night?"

“Yes...I was trespassing on his property to get the raspberries for my cocktails, but I didn’t know it at the time. And Burt...” I could barely say his name without feeling a pang of dread. “Burt did his homework. He found out about my past and used it against me.”

Trina was staring at me like I’d just confessed to murder. “I knew there was something going on. You usually let me know where you’re going, who you’re gonna be with at night if you’re not working.”

I bit my lip, feeling the weight of my lies crushing me. “Yes.”

Trina’s voice softened, but there was a hard edge to it. “Have you found anything suspicious?”

I hesitated. What had I really found? Some photos of armed men, documents I didn’t understand...Nothing concrete, nothing that screamed Maxwell was involved in anything illegal. “I’m not sure,” I admitted. “But he’s been so kind to me, Trina. Even gentle. I don’t want to believe anything bad about him. I think...I think he’s got a past he’s trying to leave behind just like I am.”

Trina studied me for a moment, her expression softening. “Oh, Raya...You’re falling for him, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know,” I whispered. But the truth was, I did know. I could feel it in the way my heart fluttered every time I thought of Maxwell, the way his touch lingered on my skin long after we’d parted. But how could I admit that when I didn’t even know if I could trust him?

Trina sighed, pulling me over to the couch to have a seat. “So tell me more about him. What exactly does the FBI think he’s into?”

I ran a hand through my hair, trying to sort through the tangled mess of my thoughts. “Maybe cartels, drugs...I’m not sure. I know that Maxwell runs an agricultural export business, but...”

“But what?” Trina pressed.

I shook my head, feeling more confused than ever. “I don’t know. I don’t know if Maxwell or maybe even Burt had something to do with Johnny...”

Suddenly, it hit me. Trina had been there, at the bar, the nights both Burt and Johnny showed up. Did she know more than she was letting on? Had I said too much?

Trina’s face darkened as she watched me, and I realized I’d been silent too long. “Raya,” she said quietly, “I’m your best friend, for god’s sake. You can’t possibly think I had something do with your ex getting offed? I thought you knew me better than that.”

“Trina, I...”

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:43 am

But she didn't let me finish. She stood up, shaking her mass of blonde curls. "You know what? Just forget it." And with that, she turned and stormed back into her bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

I sat there, stunned, the silence ringing in my ears. The guilt gnawed at me, but I couldn't let it consume me. I had to keep going. I had to find out the truth.

With a heavy heart, I got up and walked back to my room. It was Wednesday, and I knew I'd see Maxwell at Sweet Cocktails tonight. I needed to see him. I needed to figure out where I stood before this whole thing consumed me.

The drive to the bar felt longer than usual, my mind racing with everything that had happened. Johnny's death, Trina's anger, the photos I'd found in Maxwell's hidden room. I was falling for him, I couldn't deny that, but I was also terrified. The photos I discovered in his office—they frightened me. Some of them showed armed men. Was that normal for exporters? Maybe that type of security was necessary for moving large quantities of goods across international borders? Or could he really be working with the cartels, like Burt suggested?

And now Johnny was dead. My head was spinning, and I realized that unless I chose who to place my trust in, my own life could be at stake.

As I walked into the VIP area at Sweet Cocktails, I tried to steady my nerves. The lights were dim, the music soft, but the tension inside me was almost unbearable. I had to keep it together. I had to face Maxwell, look into those dark eyes of his, and

figure out what the hell was really going on.

When he walked in at the appointed hour with his entourage, he caught my eye and smiled, looking as sexy and composed as ever. But tonight, I wasn't just here to serve him a drink. I was here to get answers, no matter what it took.

Chapter Six

MAXWELL

Lying next to Raya in the soft glow of the bedroom, I could feel her tension vibrating through the mattress, a taut energy that contrasted sharply with the gentle rise and fall of her chest. Her soft caramel skin, warm and smooth beneath my fingers, seemed almost too delicate for the weight she was carrying. I could tell something was gnawing at her, something she was trying hard to keep from me, but I didn't press. Not yet.

The room was dimly lit, the night spilling through the large windows in shades of deep blue, casting shadows that danced across the walls. The scent of jasmine drifted in from the garden, mingling with the faint smell of the ocean that was always present here, a reminder of the world beyond these walls. The bed was big enough for both of us to lose ourselves in, but right now, it felt like the smallest space in the world, as if it were closing in on us, making the air thick with unspoken words.

I reached out, brushing a strand of hair away from her face, my fingers lingering on her cheek. Her skin was soft, her eyes wide and shimmering with unshed tears. She was holding back, trying so hard to keep it together, but I knew she was close to breaking.

And then, just as I thought she might keep it all inside, the dam broke. Raya's breath hitched, and she suddenly turned away from me, her shoulders shaking with the force

of her sobs. It was as if she couldn't hold it in any longer, as if the pressure had become too much, and it all came pouring out in a flood of tears.

I didn't say anything at first. I just moved closer, wrapping my arms around her from behind, pulling her against my chest. Her body was warm, her back pressed to my front, and I could feel every tremor that ran through her as she cried. I rested my chin on her shoulder, my lips close to her ear, trying to offer comfort without words.

"Raya," I finally whispered, my voice low and soft, barely more than a breath. "Darling. Talk to me. Tell me what's wrong. Please. Whatever it is, I want to help."

She didn't answer immediately. She just cried, her sobs muffled against the pillow. I could feel her pain, raw and palpable, and it tore at something deep inside me. It took everything I had to stay calm, to not demand answers, to let her come to me on her own terms.

After what felt like an eternity, she began to speak, her voice thick with emotion. "My ex-boyfriend," she said, the words tumbling out between shaky breaths. "He...he showed up at the bar. Johnny."

My jaw clenched, but I kept my voice steady, soothing. "What did he do, Raya? What happened between you?"

She took a shuddering breath, and I felt her relax slightly in my arms, as if the simple act of talking was helping to ease some of the weight she was carrying. "I grew up in foster care," she began, her voice barely more than a whisper. "In the system. I was shuffled around a lot, never had a real family, never had anyone to rely on. It was...it was rough. I was just a kid, and I had no one."

I held her tighter, my chest tightening at the thought of her being so alone, so vulnerable at such a young age. She continued, her voice wavering. "Then Johnny

found me. He...he offered me a way out. He said he'd take care of me, that I didn't have to be alone anymore. I was desperate, naive. I believed him."

Her words were laced with bitterness, self-loathing. I stroked her hair, trying to soothe her, to offer comfort where words couldn't. "But he didn't take care of you," I said softly, knowing instinctively where this story was going.

"No," she whispered, her voice breaking. "He didn't. He got me hooked on drugs, and then...then he started pimping me out. I thought I had no choice. I thought that was all I was worth. I was so stupid, so broken."

The tears started again, and I could feel the wetness of them soaking into the pillow. My heart ached for her, for the pain she'd endured, for the way she'd been used and discarded by someone who should have protected her. I wanted to find Johnny and make him pay for what he'd done to her.

"But Johnny's dead now," she whispered after a long moment, her voice trembling. "I saw it on the news this morning. His car went off a cliff. The police say it was an accident, but...I don't know, Maxwell. I don't know if I believe that."

I tensed at her words, the implications swirling in my mind. Johnny's sudden appearance, his death—something about it didn't sit right with me either. But I couldn't let Raya see that. Not yet. "Tell me everything," I urged gently, trying to keep my voice calm. "What happened? How did he die?"

She hesitated, and I could feel the fear in her. "It was on the news this morning," she repeated, her voice quieter now, almost as if she were afraid to say the words out loud. "His car...it went off a cliff and crashed at the bottom of a ravine. The police say it was an accident, probably because he was looking at his phone while he should have focusing on the road, but...I don't know, Maxwell. I don't know what to believe."

Her words hung in the air between us, heavy with the weight of what they could mean. If Johnny's death wasn't an accident, then someone had killed him, or at least arranged his murder. And if someone had killed him, could Raya be in danger as well? The thought made my blood run cold.

I shifted, turning her in my arms so that I could look into her eyes. "Raya," I said carefully, "if it wasn't an accident, do you think someone might be after you too?"

Her eyes were wide, filled with a fear that made my heart ache. "I don't know," she whispered, her voice trembling. "I don't know who to trust, Maxwell. I'm scared."

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:43 am

I could feel my protective instincts kicking in, a fierce desire to keep her safe, to shield her from whatever darkness was closing in. I cupped her face in my hands, forcing her to meet my gaze.

“Raya, I understand what you’re feeling. More than you know. I wish I could tell you everything, but I can’t. It’s for your own protection. But I need you to know that we have something in common. We’ve both risked everything to live without stains on our soul, to be free. Freedom is a precious thing, something never to take for granted but for which to strive and be grateful every single moment.”

Her eyes searched mine for a long moment. “Like love?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. “Only...I’ve never really known it.”

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut. I hadn’t expected her to be so vulnerable, so raw. I brushed my thumb over her cheek, wiping away a stray tear. “Neither have I,” I admitted, my voice rough with emotion. “But maybe...maybe we can find it together.”

The words hung between us, heavy with meaning, and for a moment, it felt like the whole world had narrowed down to just this—Just us. There was something between us, something real and undeniable, and it scared me as much as it thrilled me. I had spent so long keeping people at a distance, building walls around my heart, but with Raya, those walls were starting to crumble.

I leaned in, pressing my lips to hers, slow and tender. She responded instantly, her hands coming up to cup my face, her fingers in my hair. The kiss was soft at first, tentative, as if we were both afraid of breaking whatever fragile connection had

formed between us. But then it deepened, the intensity building, the heat between us flaring into something almost overwhelming.

I rolled us over so that I was hovering above her, my weight supported by my forearms as I kissed her deeply, hungrily. Her hands roamed over my naked back, pulling me closer, as if she needed the contact as much as I did. There was a desperation in the way we moved together, as if we were trying to drown out the rest of the world, to lose ourselves in each other.

I could feel her heartbeat beneath my fingertips, fast and erratic, matching the rhythm of my own. Her skin was warm, her body soft and yielding beneath mine. I kissed her neck, her collarbone, the hollow of her throat, each touch igniting a fire inside me that threatened to consume us both.

She arched against me, her breath hitching as my hands roamed lower, exploring the curves of her body. Her skin was like silk under my fingers, her scent intoxicating. I wanted to lose myself in her, to forget everything else, if only for a little while.

But even as her hips met mine, even as I felt the connection between us deepen, a part of my mind remained alert, cautious. There was so much I hadn't told her, so much I was still trying to figure out. I could sense that she was holding back too, that there was more she wasn't telling me. But I couldn't push her, not now. Not when she was so vulnerable, so raw.

We moved in sync, our bodies perfectly attuned to each other, the rhythm of our movements a silent conversation that spoke of need, of desire, of something deeper that neither of us could fully articulate. Every touch, every kiss, felt like a promise, a silent vow that we would figure this out together, no matter how complicated or dangerous it might become.

As the intensity built, I could feel the tension in her body, the way her breath

quickened, the way her nails dug into my back, grounding herself in the sensation. I wanted to give her everything, to show her that she was safe with me, that whatever shadows haunted her, I would chase them away. Her body arched beneath mine, and I pressed deeper, my name a gasp on her lips, a sound that sent a jolt of electricity through me.

When we finally reached the peak, it was like falling apart and coming back together all at once, a shattering of boundaries that left us both breathless, trembling in the aftermath. I held her close, my forehead resting against hers as we struggled to catch our breath, our bodies slick with sweat and satisfaction. For a moment, there was nothing but the sound of our breathing, the quiet of the room wrapping around us like a cocoon.

I could feel her heart beating against my chest, her body still quivering with the aftershocks. I wanted to stay like this forever, just the two of us, lost in our own little world. But I knew it wasn't that simple. There were still too many unanswered questions, too many secrets between us.

As the seconds ticked by, I could feel the weight of reality creeping back in, the tension that had been momentarily banished returning with a vengeance. Raya shifted in my arms, and I knew she was feeling it too. Her body was still, but her mind was clearly racing, and I could sense the turmoil brewing inside her.

I lifted my head to look at her, my hand brushing a damp lock of hair from her forehead. "Raya," I said softly, my voice laced with concern. "Talk to me. I know there's more you're not telling me."

She bit her lip, her eyes flickering with uncertainty. For a moment, I thought she might retreat again, pull away and shut down. But then she surprised me, her voice barely more than a whisper as she confessed, "Maxwell...I'm scared. I don't know who to trust. I don't even know if I can trust myself."

Her words were like a punch to the gut, but I kept my expression neutral, refusing to let her see the fear that was gnawing at me. “You can trust me,” I said, trying to infuse my voice with as much reassurance as possible. “I swear to you, Raya, I will do everything I can to protect you. But I need you to trust me too. I can’t help you if you shut me out.”

Her eyes searched mine, as if looking for some sign that I was telling the truth. “But you’re not telling me everything either,” she said, her voice trembling. “How can I trust you when I know you’re keeping things from me?”

She was right, of course. There were things I hadn’t told her, things I couldn’t tell her—not yet, anyway. But that didn’t mean I didn’t want to. I wanted to tell her everything, to lay it all out on the table and let her see the real me, even the parts of myself that I kept hidden from the world. But I couldn’t risk it. Not until I knew for sure who was pulling the strings, who was behind Johnny’s death, and what role, if any, Raya was playing in this twisted game.

“I wish I could tell you everything,” I admitted, my voice thick with regret. “But there are things...things that are too dangerous for you to know. Not because I don’t trust you, but because I can’t risk putting you in harm’s way. Not until I figure out what’s going on.”

Her expression softened, her hand reaching up to cup my cheek. “Maxwell, I don’t want you to protect me by keeping secrets. I’ve had enough of people lying to me, hiding things from me. I just want the truth, even if it’s ugly.”

“I understand,” I said, my heart aching at the pain in her voice. “And I promise you, I will tell you everything when the time is right. But right now, there’s too much at stake. I need you to trust that I’m doing this for you, for us. We share more than you know, Raya. We’ve both left our pasts behind to start over, and that’s something I don’t take lightly. You must have faith in yourself, in your own strength and inner

wisdom.”

She looked at me, her eyes filled with emotion so intense it cut straight to my core. “Do you think it’s possible, Maxwell? To leave the past behind?”

“I do,” I said firmly. “Freedom is everything, Raya. But so is love. And that’s the one thing money can’t buy. We’ve both been through hell, but we’ve come out the other side. We’re survivors. And I’m not going to let anything or anyone take that away from us.”

She let out a shaky breath, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “I want to believe that. I want to believe that we have a chance.”

“Then do,” I urged, my voice gentle but insistent. “Because I want that, too.”

She nodded slowly, as if trying to convince herself. But I could see the doubt lingering in her eyes, the fear that still gripped her. I couldn’t blame her. There was so much at play, so many variables that neither of us fully understood. But I knew one thing for certain—I wasn’t going to lose her. Not now, maybe not ever.

I kissed her again, slow and tender, trying to convey all the emotions I couldn’t put into words. She responded immediately, pulling me closer. But even as we lost ourselves in each other once more, a part of me remained on edge, the gears in my mind turning. Johnny’s death wasn’t an accident, of that I was now certain. Someone had killed him, and I had a sinking feeling that Raya was caught in the crossfire. I vowed to do whatever it took to keep her safe, to keep her by my side. But I couldn’t afford to let my guard down, not until I knew who the players were and what their endgame was. And until then, I would have to play my cards close to my chest, even with Raya. I needed to figure out who was behind it, who was pulling the strings, before it was too late. For both of us.

Chapter Seven

RAYA

After spending the night with Maxwell, I woke up feeling both comforted and conflicted. The warmth of his body beside mine, the strength in his arms as they held me close, made me feel secure in a way I hadn't felt in a long time. But as much as I wanted to stay cocooned in this temporary sanctuary, I knew I had a decision to make—a decision that could change everything. One thing had become clear to me as I lay there, listening to the rhythm of Maxwell's breathing: I was done being controlled. Done letting fear dictate my actions. I had come too far, overcome too much. I wasn't that scared, broken girl anymore. I was stronger now, and it was time to start acting like it.

Carefully, I slipped out from under Maxwell's arm, trying not to wake him as I gathered my clothes from the floor. I dressed quietly, my mind made up. I was going to confront Burt. Tell him I was done. Whatever the consequences, I'd face them head-on. I wouldn't let anyone use my past against me anymore. And as for Maxwell...I wasn't sure what the future held, but I knew I was falling for him. I could feel it in every fiber of my being, and I was done pretending otherwise.

Maxwell stirred as I finished dressing, his eyes blinking open as he reached for me. "Raya?" His voice was thick with sleep, a soft smile curving his lips. "Where are you going?"

I leaned down to kiss him, a brief, tender press of my lips against his. "I have to take care of something," I said softly, brushing a hand through his tousled hair. "See you later?"

He frowned, his brows drawing together in concern. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I lied, forcing a smile. “Just...something I need to do. I’ll explain later, okay?”

He didn’t look convinced, but he nodded, his hand trailing down my arm to catch my fingers in his. “All right,” he said. “Your car is in the garage. I’ll have someone bring it around front whenever you’re ready,” he said, his voice still laced with sleep.

I nodded, feeling a pang of guilt twist in my stomach. I didn’t deserve his kindness, not after everything I’d done, everything I’d hidden from him. And yet, I couldn’t bring myself to tell him the truth, at least not right now.

As I slipped out of bed and gathered my clothes, I could feel Maxwell’s eyes on me, watching every movement. I dressed quietly, the morning air cool against my skin. He sat up, the sheets pooling around his waist, his bare chest exposed, and I had to force myself not to get lost in the sight of him.

I had to stay focused. I had to remember why I was doing this.

“I’ll call for your car,” he said, sliding out of bed and pulling on his pants. “Unless you’d like to stay for breakfast?”

I shook my head. “No, I should go.” My voice was barely above a whisper.

Maxwell didn’t push, just nodded and reached for his phone. A few moments later, he told me my car would be out front when I was ready.

The drive back to my apartment was a blur. The city rushed past me, a wash of colors

and sounds that barely registered. All I could think about was the decision I had made. I wasn't going to let anyone control me anymore, not Burt, not the FBI, not my past, and not my fear. I had to take back control of my life, no matter the cost.

When I got home, Trina was still asleep, her bedroom door slightly ajar. I slipped into the bathroom, trying to gather my thoughts, trying to figure out how to tell Burt that I was done spying on Maxwell. I splashed cold water on my face, staring at my reflection in the mirror.

By the time I finished getting ready, Trina was up, yawning as she shuffled into the kitchen. She ignored me at first and started making coffee, her movements slow and deliberate. I watched her, feeling a pang of guilt. She was my best friend, and I had dragged her into my mess when she didn't deserve it.

"Morning," she finally said glancing up at me, her voice rough from sleep. She poured herself a cup of coffee and offered me one. I shook my head, my stomach too knotted to even think about drinking anything.

"Morning," I replied, my voice tight.

She gave me a curious look. "You okay?"

I nodded quickly, too quickly. "Yeah, just...I've got a lot to do today."

She didn't press further, but I could tell things were still off between us. I needed to get out of the apartment, needed to clear my head. I grabbed my phone and sent Burt a text, telling him I needed to see him urgently. His reply was quick, telling me to come by his office with whatever I had.

As I headed out the door, Trina called after me, "Have a nice day."

I looked back at her and forced a smile, nodding as I walked out. I wasn't sure if she meant it in a general sense or if she knew more than she was letting on. Either way, her words echoed in my mind as I drove to Burt's office, the knot in my stomach tightening with every mile.

But when I got there, I was met with flashing lights, police cars blocking off the street, and a crowd of onlookers gathered around the entrance. My heart plummeted, dread pooling in the pit of my stomach. Something was wrong...Something was very wrong.

I parked my car and got out, weaving through the crowd, trying to get closer. I could see the black and yellow crime scene tape, the officers keeping people back. My heart pounded in my chest, a sick feeling rising in my throat.

"What happened?" I asked a woman standing nearby, her face pale as she clutched her purse.

"They said...they said someone shot themselves," she whispered, her voice trembling.

Shot themselves? My mind raced, my thoughts colliding into each other in a frantic mess. No, it couldn't be. Burt wouldn't...he wouldn't do that.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:43 am

I pushed my way closer, ignoring the officers' warnings to stay back. My eyes locked on the stretcher being wheeled out of the building, the body covered with a blood-soaked sheet. I couldn't breathe, couldn't think. All I could see was the blood, the crimson stain spreading across the white fabric.

And then a corner of the sheet fell back, and I saw his face. Burt's face, pale and lifeless, the wound in his skull glaring at me like an accusation. I stumbled back, my legs giving out as I hit the pavement. No, no, no. This wasn't happening. It couldn't be happening.

But it was. Burt was dead. And now I knew for certain that Johnny's death hadn't been accidental. He'd been murdered, and now someone had just killed Burt too, minutes before I arrived.

I scrambled back to my car, my hands shaking so badly I could barely get the keys into the ignition. My mind was racing, trying to piece together what was happening, but nothing made sense. Who was behind this? Who would want Burt dead? And why?

Maxwell's face flashed in my mind, the way he had looked at me this morning, so kind, so understanding. But what if it was all an act? What if he was behind all of this? My heart ached at the thought, but I couldn't ignore the possibility. I had seen the photos, the armed men. Was he working with the cartels after all? Had Burt been right?

I pulled out my phone and texted Maxwell, my hands trembling as I typed out the message:

Something's happened.

His response was almost immediate:

Where are you? Are you all right?

I stared at the screen, my mind racing. Could I trust him? Should I tell him where I was? But before I could decide, my phone rang. It was Maxwell.

I hesitated for a moment, then answered the call, my voice shaky. "Hello?"

"Raya, what's going on? Are you okay?" His voice was filled with concern, and it made my heart twist.

"I'm...I'm fine," I lied, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Raya, listen to me," Maxwell said, his voice firm. "Where are you? I'm coming to get you."

"No," I blurted out, panic rising in my chest. "I don't...I don't want to see you right now."

There was a pause, and I could hear the confusion in his voice when he spoke again. "I don't understand. What's happened?"

I couldn't hold back the tears any longer. They spilled down my cheeks as I confessed everything, my words tumbling out in a frantic rush. "An FBI agent named Burt Stamford caught me trespassing on your property. I was picking raspberries for my cocktails, but I didn't know...I didn't know what I was getting into. He uncovered my past, used it to blackmail me into spying on you. I'm sorry, Maxwell. I didn't see another way out."

There was a long silence on the other end of the line, and I held my breath, waiting for his response.

“I knew you were sneaking around,” he finally said, his voice quiet. “I just didn’t know who you were working for, or why. But I knew you were innocent, Raya. Someone was using you, and I was just waiting for you to trust me enough to tell me the truth, to allow me to help you.”

My heart ached at his words, and I could feel the guilt gnawing at me. “I’m so sorry, Maxwell. I didn’t mean for any of this to happen.”

My voice cracked, and the tears streamed down my face, blurring my vision. My mind was spinning, a chaotic whirl of fear, guilt, and confusion.

“Raya, listen to me,” Maxwell’s voice was firm but gentle, a steadying force in the storm raging inside me. “This doesn’t change anything between us. I told you before, I’m falling for you, and that hasn’t changed. But I need to know...what was Burt looking for? What did he want from you?”

“I don’t know,” I whispered, shaking my head even though he couldn’t see me. “He never told me exactly what he was after. All I know is that he wanted information about your business.”

Maxwell was silent for a long moment. I could hear him breathing, could almost picture him running a hand through his dark hair, trying to piece together what this all meant.

I gulped, my hand trembling as I pressed the phone to my ear. “And now Burt is dead.”

“What?” he asked. “How? How do you know this?”

“I...I was going to see him...To tell him I wouldn’t let him use me anymore to do his dirty work. That I was done working for him and I didn’t care if he went to the press with my past or not. But I...I never got a chance. They’re saying it looks like a suicide, but I don’t believe it, not after Johnny’s death.”

“You think I was behind the killings, don’t you?” he asked, his tone unreadable.

The question hit me with the force of a battering ram. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to push away the terrible doubt that had been gnawing at me since I saw Burt’s body, lifeless on that stretcher. “I don’t want to, but I don’t know what to think anymore,” I admitted, my voice trembling. “I’m terrified, Maxwell. I’m in way over my head.”

“Raya, please don’t do this,” he pleaded, his voice thick with emotion. “You need to trust me, now more than ever.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:43 am

“I want to,” I cried, the words spilling out before I could stop them. “I really do. But I need time to figure things out. I need to get my head on straight.”

He was silent for a moment, and I could hear the pain in his voice when he spoke again. “What are you saying, Raya?”

“I don’t want to see you right now,” I said, my heart breaking as I forced the words out. “I just...I need some space.”

“Raya, no,” he protested, his voice urgent, desperate. “Please, don’t do this. You could be in serious danger, and not having me by your side... you’re putting yourself at risk. I can’t let that happen.”

“I can handle myself,” I replied, though the words felt hollow. “I don’t need you to take care of me.”

“I’m not trying to take care of you, I’m trying to protect you,” he insisted.

“I need time,” I said, my voice barely a whisper. “I’m sorry.”

“Raya...”

I hung up before he could say anything else, the sound of the disconnecting line echoing in my ears. I dropped the phone onto the passenger seat, my hands cold and shaking as I gripped the steering wheel. My heart was racing, my chest tight with the weight of everything that had just happened. I felt like I was drowning, suffocating under the pressure of it all.

Zayn had asked me to come in early to Sweet Cocktails to restock the VIP room bar and meet with him afterward to discuss future promotions for my raspberry martini. I drove to the bar, grateful for the distraction of having somewhere to go and something to do. I needed the familiarity of the place, the routine, the escape.

When I arrived, the parking lot was nearly empty. It was still early—too early for the regulars to start trickling in. I parked in my usual spot and made my way inside, the familiar scent of alcohol and polished wood hitting me as soon as I stepped through the door. It was a comfort, in a way, a reminder that there were still things in my life that hadn't spiraled out of control.

Anything to keep my mind off the horrible house of mirrors that had become my life. I grabbed a box of glassware from the storeroom and headed upstairs, the silence of the empty bar pressing in around me.

As I started restocking the shelves, I tried to focus on the task at hand, to lose myself in the simple, repetitive motions. But my mind kept drifting back to Burt, to the image of his lifeless body on that stretcher, to the feeling of dread that had settled in the pit of my stomach.

I was so lost in thought that I didn't even notice when I knocked a tray of glasses off the counter. They shattered on the floor, the sound sharp and jarring in the quiet room. I cursed under my breath, kneeling down to pick up the pieces.

As I reached under one of the tables, my hand brushed against something small and hard. I frowned, my fingers closing around the object as I pulled it out to get a better look. It was a tiny device, no bigger than a matchbox, with a small antenna protruding from one end.

A chill ran down my spine as I realized what it was—a listening device. Someone had been spying on Maxwell and his associates last night.

I gasped, dropping the device as if it had burned me. My heart was pounding in my chest, a sick feeling of dread settling over me. Who had put it there? Who had been listening to their conversations, and why?

“Raya?” Zayn’s voice startled me, and I jumped, the broken glass scattering across the floor. I looked up to see him standing in the doorway, his dark eyes locked on me, on the bug in my hand.

I felt a cold sweat break out across my skin as I stared at him, realization dawning on me with terrifying clarity. It was him. It had been Zayn all along.

“You found it,” he said, his voice calm, almost casual, as if we were discussing the weather and not the fact that he had been spying on me.

“Why?” I demanded, my voice shaking. “What were you after? Did you kill Johnny? Burt?”

He didn’t answer, just stepped closer, his hand slipping into his jacket. I saw the glint of metal, the gun, before he pulled it out and pointed it at me.

My breath caught in my throat, fear flooding my veins. “Zayn...please, don’t do this.”

But he just smiled, a cold, cruel smile that sent a shiver down my spine. “It didn’t have to be this way, Raya. It really didn’t. But now you’ve given me no choice.”

I screamed and turned to run, but he was faster. His hand closed around my wrist, yanking me back with a force that nearly knocked the wind out of me. I struggled

against him, but he was too strong, his grip like iron as he pulled me toward the door.

“Let me go!” I cried, my voice hoarse with panic.

But he didn’t listen. He just tightened his grip on me, his other hand still holding the gun, the barrel pointed directly at my chest.

My mind was racing, desperate for a way out, but there was none. I was trapped, alone, and completely at his mercy.

“Please,” I begged, fat tears rolling down my cheeks. “Please don’t do this.”

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:43 am

But he just smiled again, that cold, heartless smile that made my blood run cold.

“You should have stayed out of it, Raya,” he said, his voice low and menacing. “But now, you’re going to pay the price.”

Chapter Eight

MAXWELL

I paced the length of my office, the phone still clenched in my hand, its cold surface grounding me in the reality of the situation. Raya was in danger—serious danger. I could feel it in my bones. Burt's death wasn't just a random act of violence, but a deliberate move in a game where the stakes were far higher than either of us could have imagined. And now Raya was caught in the middle of it.

Burt was small-time compared to whoever was really pulling the strings. The kind of people Burt had to answer to didn't care about legalities or FBI protocols—they cared about power, control, and maintaining their dominance by any means necessary. Raya might not have even realized what she'd gotten herself into. She might not have known what she'd discovered, or why it was so important, but that didn't matter to them. All that mattered was that she was close—too close—and they'd stop at nothing to silence her if they thought she was a threat.

I leaned against the edge of my desk, trying to piece it all together. There had to be something linking us all—Johnny, Burt, Raya, and me. Something we all had in common. The connections were murky, entangled in a web of deceit and hidden motives, but there was one common thread I couldn't ignore: Sweet Cocktails. The

bar was the place where our lives had intersected, where things had started to spiral out of control.

And then it hit me—Zayn Cole. Raya had mentioned she had a meeting with the owner. The realization sent a jolt of fear through me, and I felt the blood drain from my face. Zayn had always been too slick, too confident, always a little too comfortable in his position at the bar. I'd never liked him, but I hadn't thought he was capable of something like this. Now, though, I wasn't so sure. If Zayn was involved, then Raya's life was in immediate danger.

I couldn't waste any more time. I had to get to her before it was too late.

The drive to Sweet Cocktails passed in a blur. The city lights streaked past me in a haze as I pushed the car to its limits, my mind racing with every possible scenario that could be unfolding inside the bar. I replayed our last conversation over and over again in my head, trying to pick up on anything I might have missed, anything that could give me an edge when I confronted Zayn.

I had never felt so helpless, the thought of Raya in danger eating away at me like acid. My fingers tightened on the steering wheel as I sped through the city, my only focus on getting to her in time. The bar loomed ahead, a beacon of neon lights, and I could already feel the tension coiling in my muscles as I pulled into the parking lot and killed the engine on my Lamborghini. The air felt heavy, oppressive. I could sense the danger lurking just beneath the surface, waiting to strike.

I pushed through the front door, my pulse echoing in my ears as I scanned the place for any sign of Raya.

And then I saw her.

She was standing near the back of the bar, her body tense, her eyes wide with fear.

Zayn was close, too close, with a gun in his hand. The sight of that weapon aimed at Raya sent a cold, deadly fury coursing through me, my vision narrowing as I locked onto Zayn. Every muscle in my body tensed, ready to spring into action, but I forced myself to stay calm, to keep my emotions in check.

“Maxwell,” Zayn said, his voice smooth and taunting as he acknowledged my presence. He smirked, as if he’d been expecting me all along. “Right on time.”

I took a step forward, my gaze locked on Zayn, every instinct screaming at me to tear him apart. But I couldn’t afford to lose control, not with Raya’s life on the line. I needed to be smart, strategic, and not let my anger cloud my judgment. “Let her go, Zayn,” I said, my voice calm, controlled, despite the rage simmering just beneath the surface.

Zayn’s smirk widened, his grip on the gun tightening. “Oh, I don’t think so. You see, Raya here has been quite useful. She’s gotten me closer to you than anyone else has been able to.”

Raya’s eyes darted to me, filled with a mixture of fear and guilt. “Maxwell...I’m sorry,” she whispered, her voice trembling.

“It’s not your fault,” I said, my gaze never leaving Zayn. “This isn’t on you, Raya.”

Zayn chuckled, shaking his head as if the whole situation amused him. “Isn’t it, though? She was so easy to manipulate. All I had to do was push a few buttons, and she was right where I wanted her.”

My blood boiled, but I forced myself to keep my emotions in check. “You’re a coward, Zayn. Hiding behind a gun, using people like pawns. It’s pathetic.”

Zayn’s expression darkened, the smirk fading as he stepped closer to Raya, pressing

the barrel of the gun against her side. “You don’t get it, do you, Maxwell? This is bigger than you. You’re just a piece in a much larger game. But you’ve always known that, haven’t you? You, of all people, should understand what it means to be caught in the web of something you can’t control.”

Raya’s gaze flickered between us, confusion and fear etched on her face. “Maxwell, what is he talking about?”

I took a deep breath, knowing that this was the moment when I had to lay everything out, to reveal the truth I’d been keeping from her. “Raya, there’s something you need to know about me. I come from a cartel family overseas. My father was a brutal man—killings, kidnappings, atrocities committed in the name of power and money. When I found out what he was capable of, I wanted no part of it. I cooperated with international authorities who helped me relocate to the U.S. in exchange for what I knew about my father, and I assumed a new identity. I was able to put my business acumen to use in the agricultural export industry where I now run several companies. But that’s not all. I work closely with my network and the authorities to track and catch sex traffickers who capitalizing on our shipping routes for their own nefarious operations.”

Raya’s eyes widened in shock, her breath catching in her throat. “You...you’re not involved with the cartels?”

“No, I’m not,” I said, my voice firm, wanting her to understand the gravity of the situation. “But Zayn is.”

The bar owner laughed again, the sound cold and devoid of any warmth. “Burt was a fool. He thought he could play both sides, but in the end, he was just another pawn. I paid him to get information on Maxwell’s contacts and routes for the cartels. But when Johnny showed up, things got complicated. I couldn’t risk him screwing up my plan to use you, Raya. And when Burt wanted out, well...I couldn’t let that happen.”

The room seemed to close in on us, the tension thickening with every passing second. My eyes never left Zayn, my mind racing as I tried to figure out how to get Raya out of this alive. The anger inside me boiled over, but I kept my voice steady, controlled. “This ends now, Zayn.”

Zayn raised the gun, aiming it directly at me. “Not if I have anything to say about it.”

But Raya was faster. With a swift, desperate kick, she knocked the gun out of Zayn’s hand. It clattered to the floor, the metallic sound echoing through the bar as I lunged at him. We crashed to the ground, fists flying as we grappled for control.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:43 am

Zayn was strong, his movements fueled by desperation, but my fury gave me the edge I needed. I landed a hard punch to his jaw, sending him reeling back. Before he could recover, the door burst open, and Alejandro and the rest of my men stormed in, guns drawn. The local authorities were right behind them.

Zayn was outnumbered, outgunned, and defeated. The fight drained out of him, his face a mask of shock and disbelief as he realized he'd lost. He looked up at me, his eyes filled with hatred. "This isn't over, Maxwell. You think you've won, but you have no idea what's coming."

I ignored his words, my only focus on Raya. She ran to me, her body trembling as she threw her arms around me, her tears soaking into my shirt. "Maxwell...I'm so sorry. I never should have doubted you."

I held her close, my heart pounding in my chest as I buried my face in her hair. The fear that had gripped me since I realized she was in danger began to ease, replaced by a deep, overwhelming sense of relief. "Raya, you have nothing to apologize for. You didn't know; how could you have? Of course I forgive you. I want you by my side, now and always."

She clung to me, her body shaking as she fought to steady her breath. I could feel the intensity of her emotions, the rawness of her fear and relief mixing in a way that was almost palpable. I smoothed her hair, my fingers gently caressing her scalp as I tried to offer her some semblance of comfort. The chaos around us seemed to blur, the world narrowing to just the two of us.

"I thought I lost you," she whispered, her voice cracking with the weight of her

emotions. Her eyes were red-rimmed, her cheeks wet with tears.

“You’re safe now,” I said softly, holding her closer. “That’s all that matters. I’ll make sure you’re never in danger again.”

Alejandro approached us, his expression a mix of concern and professionalism. “We’ve got Zayn under control and the local police updated. The FBI is being brought in. They’ll be able to provide more information soon.”

I nodded, my attention still focused on Raya. “Thank you, Alejandro. I need to be with her right now.”

Alejandro gave a brief nod of understanding before turning back to the team, leaving us alone in the quiet aftermath of the confrontation.

Raya turned her gaze back to me, her eyes reflecting a deep sadness mixed with hope. “I hate that there is such evil in the world. What happens now?”

“We rebuild,” I said, pulling her into a gentle embrace. “We move forward, and we stay vigilant. The threat might be over for now, but there’s still work to be done. Raya, I’ve devoted my life to justice, to seeing that people like my father and Zayn are removed from power so they can no longer prey upon the most innocent and vulnerable of the world. But I will always have a target on my back. And that means that if you are with me, you will too by association. I vow to do my best to protect you, but as you know, there are no guarantees in this life. If you no longer wish to see me, I understand and will leave you alone.”

Raya’s fingers entwined with mine as she leaned into me, her eyes shining. “Maxwell, I want to be with you, now more than ever. I am willing to take the risk and the responsibility. I am yours if you will have me.”

I looked into her eyes, seeing the sincerity and strength that had been with her all

along, and cupped her cheek. “My darling, I want nothing more than to have you by my side. We’ll face whatever comes next together.”

Raya tilted her head up, her lips finding mine in a tender, heartfelt kiss. It was a kiss that spoke of all the things we couldn’t yet put into words—of pain and healing, of trust and hope. It was a promise that we would face the future together, no matter what it held.