

Chapter One

Timothy Fardel pulled his attention away from the woman dining alone at the table next to him and his guests for the tenth time that evening. He redirected his gaze to the couple across from him to give them his undivided attention. Billy Malloy, a potential American investor, was vacationing with his wife, Ann, in Costa Rica. Tim had invited them to the restaurant to convince Malloy that his money would be profitably spent in the Australian beef export market.

“Mr. Ambassador, if you’ll excuse my frankness,” Billy Malloy said, “it doesn’t make sense that my company should invest millions in the beef market, when the country is crippled by drought. During the last quarter...”

Tim stopped listening. He couldn’t help or explain it. His senses were drawn to the stranger’s sea-green eyes, the oriental vanilla smell of her perfume, and the gracious way her slender fingers moved as she toyed with her napkin. Red beads rattled as she flicked her dreadlocks over her shoulder. Her smooth caramel skin would feel like velvet. He noticed, not without unjustified irritation, that he wasn’t the only man staring. With high cheekbones, a thin and straight nose, full lips, and her cappuccino skin tone she appeared exotic.

Tim rubbed a finger over his lips. She wasn’t a local. He’d heard her asking the waiter about the specials of the day with an English accent he couldn’t place. Judging by her toned muscles, she worked out. She had an air of adventure about her mixed with self-assurance and female sensuality. In short, she was exactly his type.

Malloy droned on, “...if we have a repeat of the recession...”

The woman finished a blue cocktail with a glazed maraschino cherry and a paper umbrella. She popped the cherry into her mouth and licked a bit of sticky syrup from her bottom lip. The waiter arrived with her meal. She had ordered steak and French fries ... in Tesoro del Mar, San José’s best seafood restaurant.

“...just don’t see why I should give them a dime.”

At long last Malloy stopped talking and sucked in a much-needed breath.

Ann, a pretty blonde who had been pushing the point of her cowboy boot against Tim’s shoe for the last twenty minutes, gave a high-pitched laugh.

“I think Tim knows what he’s talking about.” She nudged him with her toe. “Don’t you, Tim?”

Tim lifted his hands. “Don’t take my word for it. I’ll let you in on national subsidiaries. If we weren’t sure about the future of the export market, do you honestly think government would have put its money there?”

Convincing Malloy wasn’t going to be hard. It was a done deal, if Ann Malloy could keep her feet to herself.

“If that’s the case, why are other investors dropping out?” Malloy said.

Obviously eavesdropping on their conversation, the woman with the dreadlocks gave a knowing smile and cut into her steak.

“Maybe we should invite Tim out on the boat,” Ann said, “to talk some more.” She shot Tim a look he couldn’t misinterpret.

Damn, he needed that drink. He glanced around for their waiter. “If you don’t act quick, Mr. Malloy, someone else is going to snatch up the deal.” He got to his feet. “Excuse me.” He nodded at Ann. “I’m going to check at the bar for our drinks. This is taking too long.” Slow service was a pain in his backside.

Deliberately, he took the long way around his neighbor’s table, for a closer look. Tim admired her full breasts and long, deliciously arched neck. A vein throbbed softly under that delicate flesh. He could see it pulsing, hear it pumping, and itched to

taste it, to feel the flutter under his tongue. He expected her to lower her lashes under his uncivilized stare, but she met him head-on, her strikingly green eyes locking onto his. He ran his fingers over the edge of her table as he passed.

“Do you seriously expect them to buy that horseshit you’ve been feeding them?” a silky voice asked.

Tim stopped dead. He turned around slowly. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” she said.

“Are you talking to me, honey?”

“I don’t see any other shit talkers around here.” She leaned back in her chair, a challenge in her posture and expectation in the way she measured him.

He walked two steps back to her table. “Do we know each other?”

“No.”

His eyes were drawn to her lips as she offered him a smile. That generous curve was nothing short of scrumptious.

“As trite as it sounds, I think you would have remembered me.”

“Absolutely.” He assessed her figure-hugging chocolate-brown dress. “New in town?”

She cocked a shoulder. “Maybe.”

“I’d love an introduction.”

She got to her feet. She was tall for a woman, a perfect kissable height for him.

“I don’t usually mix with government officials who steal unsuspecting businessmen’s money.” Her tone was amused rather than unfriendly. “Or their wives,” she added and, with a kiss over her shoulder, walked to the exit with swaying hips.

Tim had to remind himself that Ann and Billy were watching. He glanced at the woman’s back one last time and continued to the bar.

“Manuel,” he said, reading the barman’s nametag, “I ordered three scotches more than fifteen minutes ago.”

Manuel took three glasses from under the counter. He took his time pouring the drinks. “A babe, that one.” His eyes moved to the door the woman had used to leave.

“Who is she?”

Manuel grinned. “How much is it worth to you?”

Tim studied the barman with new interest. Manuel was a clever observer. He’d do well in the diplomatic service. Tim took a bill from his pocket and left it on the counter. One way or another, he’d be able to find out. This was quicker, and, for some reason, he didn’t feel like wasting time. Manuel pushed a business card toward him. He picked it up and read the print. *Maya Martin, Tree House Lodge, Puerto Viejo, PADI Divemaster.*

“She left this, why?” Tim asked. He was sure the beautiful woman had just thrown him a bone, and he already knew he was going to run like a tail-wagging puppy.

The barman pointed with his thumb to the wooden beam above where hundreds of business cards were pinned. “To put on the notice board.”

Tim pocketed the card. “Get our waiter to bring this.” He motioned to the drinks.

Back in his seat, he was confronted with Ann’s tight smile. The waiter followed with their scotch, and Tim immediately swallowed a mouthful.

“So,” Tim leaned back in his chair, “back to business.” But his mind was elsewhere.

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In her room at the Marriot, Maya flipped through the photos in the leather folder. Timothy Fardel’s handsome features stared back at her from all different angles. His messy golden curls gave his square jaw and pronounced cheekbones a softer edge. His lips were too full for his face and his eyes too brown for his light hair, but somehow those contrasts only added to his aesthetic appeal. Some women, those who liked the blond surfer types, would say his features were perfect. The photos didn’t do him justice, though. He had impressed her with his sales skills and how he had handled the horny wife. Ms. Maloy was a woman few men would deny. Maya appreciated that Tim had shown enough respect for Maloy to reject his wife’s explicit advances.

She studied Tim’s many expressions one last time before setting them alight in an ashtray. She watched as each of his appealing faces caught fire and melted away. When the lot was done, she flushed the charred remains down the toilet. She turned on her ePad, connected to the secure satellite communication link, and hit the green button. Her boss, Cain Jones, answered on the first ring.

“All set?” he asked in his smooth, American accent.

“Target identified.” She smiled. “And engaged.”

“Good. When are you leaving for Puerto Viejo?”

“Tomorrow. No point in wasting time hanging around San José.”

“Another shipment left yesterday. That, I’m afraid, is all I know. My source dried up.”

Maya tapped her nails on the desktop. *Dried up* meant Cain’s spy had been killed. “How?”

“Torture. Bled to death. Twenty-five cuts on his torso. His body was found in a motel room, set up to look like a drug deal gone wrong.”

“Fardel?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. In any event, whatever you do, don’t blow your cover. I’m not comfortable with you alone out there, no backup nearby.”

Maya went to the bar fridge and took out a bottle of water. “Cain, we’ve been over this. I’ll be fine.” With Clelia eight months pregnant and Lann a new daddy, her colleagues were unavailable for this mission.

“I know. As long as you stick to the plan.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She unscrewed the cap and took a sip. “Get the info. Wait for instructions.”

“Find out what you can, but don’t risk your life. If things get hot, pull out.” He paused. “And it may get hot. Just as I suspected, this is connected to Godfrey.”

Cain’s elusive archenemy, Godfrey, was such a mystery, they didn’t even know his last name. “You got the proof?”

“The money that funded the experiments performed on Kat when she was held prisoner came from an offshore account in the Cayman Islands. A big transfer was made from that one to Timothy Fardel’s account.”

“No way.”

Katherine White, Lann Dréan’s pregnant wife, had been held captive so her baby could be stolen once she gave birth, but Lann managed to save Kat and his son in a secret rescue mission. Maya could only imagine how Kat would feel when she learned the research that saved her from dying in childbirth—as mothers of the seven forbidden arts babies had always done—was funded by black market arms deals.

“Got the intel from a hacker today,” Cain said. “I’ve sent you the details encrypted on the secure feed. We need to know how Fardel fits into the puzzle.”

“I’ll find out who Fardel works for or with. Don’t worry.”

“Be a good girl now and enjoy the surf.”

“Thanks, old man.”

“Hey, I’m young enough to be your brother.”

She blew a kiss into the line and cut the communication.

Maya stripped off her clothes and walked out onto the dark, hot and humid balcony in her underwear. She tipped the bottle down her front, cold rivulets of water running between her breasts down her tummy and legs. A deep sense of pleasure engulfed her as the water—her element—caressed her skin. She closed her eyes and commanded her gift. The liquid molecules reversed their flow to run back up her chest and down both shoulders. Her skin contracted in the breeze. She leaned on the rail and stared at the lit pool below. Together with their commander, Josselin, or Joss as they called him, and the team’s aeromancist Lann, she was one of the first members of Cain Jones’ paranormal crime taskforce. Her training in weapons and communication systems, courtesy of Cain, came in handy, but she was recruited for her hydromancy ability. She could manipulate water, as Lann could control the air. In their world, crime beyond the borders of reality required different skills. Godfrey was slowly gaining power by collecting his own team of special, *gifted* agents, and somehow, the Australian ambassador was connected to Godfrey. It was a pity Tim was fencing for the bad guys. She had a feeling they would have gotten on just fine.

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What a dump. With her hands on her hips, Maya turned in a circle inside the shack that served as the Puerto Viejo dive center. She sighed. Turning this baby into something workable was going to take some elbow grease. She’d have to start with cleaning and then repairs. The roof needed thatching, and the wooden walls and floor could do with sanding and a coat of varnish. No wonder the hotel leased it at such a bargain price. Located on the Tree House Lodge private beach, a long stretch of white sand with a fringe of palm trees separated the hut from an inland tropical forest. The clear turquoise water was like a siren’s call. Maybe a dip before getting down and dirty wasn’t a bad idea.

As she exited onto the sand, she spotted a man approaching on the footpath—blond curls, lean torso. The way his white linen shirt fit hinted at hard-cut abs. Even from this distance, she knew his eyes looked like melted chocolate with a swirl of hazelnut. Timothy Fardel made his way to her with an unhurried pace. He wore white slacks, rolled up to his ankles, and he was barefoot. A plastic bag he carried in one hand swayed to the rhythm of his step. Maya regarded him until he stopped in front of her.

“Miss Martin,” he said with his Australian accent. “I told you I’d like an introduction.” He held the bag to her. “This is for you.”

She crossed her arms. “Mr. Ambassador. Did you get what you wanted?”

“The money? Yeah, Bill paid up.”

“I was referring to the wife.”

“That’s not what I wanted.”

“No?” She lifted an eyebrow.

He took the business card she had left at the bar from his pocket and held it up to her. “This is.” He rattled the bag under her nose and pulled it open. “Aren’t you curious?”

She peered inside. “Strawberries and cream?”

“For the dinner you owe me. It’s more practical than flowers, don’t you think?”

“The dinner I owe you?” she asked with a mocking smile.

“To apologize for eavesdropping on my business meeting and then insulting me.”

She laughed softly. “You take a lot for granted, Mr. Ambassador.”

“I think so do you, Maya, but I’ll set you straight over the dinner you’re going to cook for me, and call me Tim.”

“All right, Tim, but you should know I don’t cook.”

“Then it’s lucky for us that I do.”

She yanked her white T-shirt and shorts from the rail and pulled them on over her bikini. To Tim’s credit, he didn’t watch her while she dressed. He waited until she was done before he took her hand in a gesture that seemed so natural it didn’t startle her.

“Where are you staying, Maya?”

“In one of the tree houses.”

He pulled her onto the path that led to the lodge. “Where are you from?”

“South Africa.”

“Your accent doesn’t sound South African. It’s hard to place.”

“I lived in New York for a long time.”

“And what brought you here?”

“The beach.”

“Why Costa Rica?”

She shrugged. “Why not?”

“How long are you staying?”

“Until I get bored.”

He stopped and faced her. “Do you get bored quickly?”

“If you’re asking if I move around, then yes, I’ve been places.”

He studied her for a moment. “That wasn’t what I was asking.” When she didn’t reply, he gave her an indulgent smile and tugged on her hand. “Come. I’m hungry.”

Maya rented one of the ten tree houses that made up the resort. Each one was constructed around the branches of the giant forest trees with good distances in between to ensure privacy. They passed through the thick vegetation of ferns and fire-red birds of paradise until her unit came in sight. Tim helped her up the ladder, his hand on her hip. Though she didn’t need assistance, Maya smiled inwardly at the gentlemanly gesture. On the narrow landing, she opened the door to a small kitchen.

Tim entered and looked around. “I’ve never been in one of these.” He left the bag on the table and walked to the backdoor. “Do you mind?” His hand was already on the knob.

“Go ahead.”

Maya followed him onto the hang bridge that led to the bedroom and bathroom. He peered inside her private domain, but didn’t enter.

“Nice view,” he said, pointing at the veranda that extended from the bedroom toward the ocean. “Sure is small. Doesn’t it get crowded?”

“It’s the only accommodation close to the scuba center, but yes, I suppose once the novelty of living in a tree wears off...”

“You’ll get bored?” He brushed her dreadlocks over her shoulders, his fingertips sweeping over her skin in a light caress.

Escaping the question more than the touch, Maya turned back onto the bridge and made her way to the kitchen. She took two beers from the fridge and twisted the caps off. When Tim re-entered, she handed him one and took a chair by the table.

“You mentioned dinner,” she said with a teasing grin.

Tim took a swig from the beer and left his bottle on the table to rummage through the fridge. After a while he straightened with his hands on his hip. “How do you live on bread, Babybel cheese, processed ham, and beer, Miss Martin?”

“Told you, I don’t eat in often.”

He rolled up his sleeves. “Tonight will be your first lesson. Come here.” He pointed at the spot next to him.

Maya got to her feet and moved over to him. “What are we making?” She couldn’t resist poking fun. “Cheese sandwiches?”

He clicked his tongue. “Maya,” his hands went to her hips, positioning her to face the counter, “never go for below-average. Always aim for excellence. Why eat a cheese sandwich, when you can have a *croque monsieur*?”

She watched in silence as Tim took the food from the fridge and peeled the red skin off the cheese.

“Here. Cut these up. Too soft to grate. Not the best cheese for grilling. Next time, get Emmental or Gruyere.”

While she obediently carved the cheese, Tim buttered slices of bread. He looked completely at home in the kitchen, finding his way around effortlessly, his movements sure and easy. Without having to conduct a search, like she had to, he retrieved a pan from the cupboard underneath the sink. He placed it on the stove and lit the gas.

“How are you doing with that cheese?”

He peered over her shoulder, his stubble grating her cheek. Pinpricks of pleasure ran down her spine.

“Good. Pay attention now, beautiful Maya.” His voice vibrated against the shell of her ear, and he inhaled softly before he pulled away. He placed ham and cheese neatly on a slice of bread. “Your turn.”

Maya built her sandwich, aware of him studying her as she worked. “There.” She offered him her masterpiece.

“Not bad for a first try,” he said, to which she snorted. He moved his hand over the pan. “It’s got to be warm but not too hot, or your gourmet meal will burn.”

He dumped the two sandwiches into the pan. A sizzling noise and the fragrant smell of frying butter filled the space. Maya brought him his beer and sipped hers while Tim flipped the bread.

When the sandwiches were done, Maya took their plates and a stack of paper napkins. “Grab some more beers, will you?” She made her way over the bridge to the front veranda.

They sat down in the deck chairs overlooking the ocean to eat their meal. By the time they had finished, the sun was setting. Tim took another beer from the six-pack by his feet and opened it before offering it to Maya.

“Thanks.” She watched him twist the cap off another beer for himself. “You’ve done a half-assed job with the introduction.”

His lips curved in a lazy way. “Insulting me again?”

“You know who I am. I on the other hand...”

His expression turned serious. “I don’t know who you are, Maya, not yet, but I fully intend to find out.”

Her skin broke out in goose bumps. The sensation shocked her. Not often did she experience a sense of trepidation because of a man. Maya regarded Tim sideways. She wasn't sure how to read him. Was his statement a warning or a suggestive remark?

"You're right about the introduction." He inclined his head. "Tim Fardel."

"How long have you been in Costa Rica, Tim Fardel?"

"Only a few months. I have a two-year term."

"Where were you before?"

"Stockholm."

"Mm. Sweden. Freezing. Costa Rica must make a nice change. Australian, right?"

"Did the accent give me away, or was it eavesdropping on our dinner conversation?"

"The accent's a dead giveaway."

"How about you? Why diving?"

"I'm good at it, and I like it." She shrugged. "Beats an office job."

"Where have you dived before?"

"Lots of places."

He laughed softly. "All right. You don't like to share. Give me just one."

"Sodwana Bay, north-east South African coast. Do you scuba dive, Tim?"

He took another swig of his beer. "Nope."

"Then you drove all the way here, just for an introduction?"

"I have a beach house a short distance up the coast."

She chuckled. "So, I shouldn't flatter myself."

His hand covered hers where it rested on the armrest of her chair, taking her by surprise. His touch was light, but there was something possessive about the way he squeezed her fingers.

"Even though I do come here every weekend," he said, "I would have flown to Sodwana Bay for an introduction."

Maya watched him with mesmerized fascination. His physical effect on her was instantaneous, both exhilarating and worrying.

She got to her feet and stood in front of him. He looked up at her with his beautiful, but guarded brown eyes. Tim was a man with many secrets. She sensed it. Which was maybe why he was difficult to read and why his eyes didn't give away much. However, he couldn't hide the desire that dilated his pupils a fraction as she slowly straddled him, their upper bodies pushed together.

To twist men around her little finger was second nature for her, but unlike other men, she couldn't predict his thoughts. What she could interpret was the hard-on growing against her pelvis, and it had its own, sensual effect on her. The blood in her veins heated, sending a throbbing need to parts of her body that suddenly and undeniably hardened.

This wasn't part of the agreement. She wasn't supposed to get physical and feel all wild around her enemy. Cain would blow his top. She could be accused of sexual harassment under their code of conduct. This was so wrong, but the lure was too strong to ignore, and Tim wanted her. His breaths, coming in harder pants, were warm puffs of air blowing over her lips. She was the one doing all the moving, stroking his cock with her pussy through their clothes while her nails scraped over the hard discs of his nipples hidden under his shirt. He did nothing but watch, his hands on the armrest of the chair. His muscles contracted under her caresses. She was right about those abs. Her fingers skimmed over the hard lines defining his body.

Instead of kissing him like she craved, she tilted her neck, inviting him to make a move. Tim's eyes widened. He swallowed. Slowly, he leaned forward, pressing their bodies even closer so that her breasts flattened against his chest. She gasped as his erection wedged deeper between her folds, adding pressure to her clit. His skin was cool in the humid heat of the day, and a light shudder that ran through his body as he inhaled. His nose pressed against her neck, he nuzzled her skin in a soft caress. His hands closed around her waist, and with a swift movement, he lifted her and placed her gently on her feet.

She blinked in surprise at the rejection. Sure, she had been turned down before. It never bothered her. Not like this. She used to see a refusal as the man's loss. In this case, the loss was definitely hers.

Tim gave her an apologetic look as he got up. He took her hand and kissed her palm. "You're a very desirable woman, Maya, but I told you, you take a lot for granted." He squeezed her hand and without another word turned for the bridge.

"Tim?" When he looked back, she said, "We never got to the strawberries."

"It's probably best for both of us that I skip dessert." He lingered only long enough to give her a sweet smile.

Maya stood on the veranda, confused. Maybe she had taken too much about Tim Fardel for granted, but there was no time to analyze what had just happened. She waited a good five minutes, using the time to grab her thermal vision binoculars and tactical flip knife from the room, before she slipped into the darkening night to follow Tim.