

CHAPTER ONE

Wednesday May 10, 2006

Manhattan NY

Jan Kruger hated Manhattan. The traffic, noise and the melting pot population were all symbols of a political system he found abhorrent. Given a choice he'd rather be sitting at home on his verandah enjoying the company of his wife and watching the South Africa sunset, but instead he was stuck in New York traffic with a hired limo driver who smelled of curry.

As a member of a South African trade group Jan had been forced to come to the US more times than he'd wished but the many visits had given him a keen sense of how America worked, and that knowledge came in handy when a junior position in the South African embassy opened up and he was hired. Now, five years later, he held the title of Assistant to the Ambassador, a woman descended from the Zulu king Cetshwayo whose forces had defeated Jan's ancestors and the British army at Isandhlwana in 1879.

He hated the ambassador as well. She represented the new South Africa, a country determined to eschew its glorious past in favor of a future built upon the deluded visions of ANC terrorists like Mandela and Walter Sisulu. Jan championed the old South Africa; its eliteness, its pride, its apartheid, and he was not alone. For the past few months he and a small cadre of like minded Afrikaners had been meeting to formulate a plan that would restore that glory in a new country they would call their own. .

There'd been a setback though. This morning he'd gotten a call from his people in Madrid. The kidnapping of Dr. Adam Gary had been botched. The two operatives sent to his hotel were in a hospital and Gary was on his way back to the States. No one had expected the scientist to put up a fight so now, Jan and the others had to come up with another way.

Traffic was still stopped. Jan glanced at the heavy gold Rolex on his wrist. If it didn't clear soon he was going to be late for his meeting, and military men, especially the United States variety were sticklers for punctuality, at least on the surface. In reality, in return for the money he'd promised them, the generals would wait until hell froze over if necessary. Jan knew how America worked.

The driver finally got the car moving again. The tie – up, caused by the collision of an airport shuttle van and a cab had drawn the police and a crowd of curious New Yorkers. As his black limo crept by the wreckage a grim Jan sat back against the plush seat. He had to figure out a way to get his hands on Dr. Adam Gary and that prototype because the prototype was one of the necessary keys to their plan. .

Friday May 12, 2006

Detroit Michigan

Mykal Chandler slid the file across the desk to Max Blake. She opened it and looked at the color photo. The head shot was of a good looking, brown – skinned brother. Beard, moustache. Hair graying slightly at the temples in a distinguished sort of way. Grown and sexy, as Babyface would say.

“Name's Dr. Adam Gary,” Mykal explained.

“Doctor of what?” Max studied the face for a few moments longer. *Nice mouth.*

“Astrophysics, for one.”

Max was impressed. “Really?”

“Supposedly the brother’s invented something that’s going to revolutionize everything from heating homes to space travel.”

Max stuck the pic back into the file. “What is it?”

“Some kind of device that produces its own energy.”

“I’ll bet the gas and oil companies aren’t happy about that. So what’s going on that we’re involved?” Mykal headed up a secret crime fighting group called NIA and Max often moonlighted as one of its operatives.

“Somebody tried to kidnap him a few days ago at a conference in Madrid.”

She glanced up.

“He thinks they were after his prototype.”

“Where is he now?”

“At a government owned house on the western side of the state.”

“You want me to go up and evaluate the security?”

“No, I want you to *be* the security. He doesn’t even have a chicken on the place.”

She was confused. “If this is such big time stuff how come there’s no security?”

“He doesn’t want any. Says having a lot of people around will interfere with the flow of his work.”

Max drawled, “You know I don’t do crazy real well, Mykal. That’s why I have two, ex – husbands.

He grinned. “He’s not crazy. *Eccentric* is the word everyone is using.”

“Educated crazy, then.”

“Bingo.”

She sighed. “Okay, so how do we work this?”

“I’m sending you in as his new housekeeper. The old one quit about a month ago.”

“Why?”

“Husband retired and they moved to Florida.”

“Okay. I haven’t exercised my pots and pans in awhile. Might be fun. Does he know I’m coming?”

“Yes, but all he knows is that the person is named Max Blake.”

“In other words, he doesn’t know I’m female.”

“Correct. I didn’t want to waste time arguing with him about it. If he throws a fit, I know you’ll handle it.”

“True that.”

Myk had no doubts about her abilities. She was a former Marine and had cut her intelligence teeth in the rebel – infested jungles of Columbia. She was tough, efficient and smart. Today, she was wearing a pair of black, alligator, cowboy boots, black jeans, a black halter top with a red cami underneath, and a black Stetson. Her attire spoke to her free spirit. When the Department of Defense sent the call to Myk to send an agent up to take care of Dr. Gary, Max immediately came to mind. “You’re the best person for the job, Max, so don’t worry about Gary trying to get you replaced. Ain’t gonna happen.”

“Thanks.” She yawned, and then stretched her arms and shoulders. The plane ride to Detroit had been a long one. Sometime in the near future she’d need a real night’s sleep.

Myk asked, “Any questions?”

“Nope.”

“Okay. Check in when you get there. If you need a map to his place, there’s one in the file.”

She stood up, showing off her five feet eleven inch frame.

“Good luck, Max.”

She threw him a loose salute and strolled out.

The only person allowed to call her *Maxine* was her mama, Michele. To everyone else she was simply Max. Because of her height and take no prisoners attitude it was a name she wore well.

She was driving up Michigan’s west coast to rendezvous with Dr. Gary. The day was beautiful and singer Anthony Hamilton was on the in – dash CD player lyrically begging Charlene to come home. Max had been driving for almost five hours but the May breeze flowing in through the open windows of the rented Honda SUV felt good.

She glanced up at the rear view mirror to check on the big male Rotweiler lying on the back seat. “How’re you doing, Ossie?”

The black and tan Ossie slowly lifted his massive head, and the misery reflected in his eyes broke Max’s heart. “I’m sorry, baby. The GPS says we’ll be there in a few. Just hang on.”

Car travel always made him sick. Vets had prescribed everything from patches to pills but nothing seemed to help.

On the other hand, Ossie's sister, Ruby, belted into the passenger seat next to Max scanned the road with eager eyes. Ruby liked riding whether it be by car, plane or boat and the longer the journey the better. Ruby's first love though was the convertible Max bought last year. Anybody who didn't believe dogs smiled had never seen Ruby riding in the T-Bird's front seat. The first time Ruby rode in it, she refused to get out after the drive was over. In fact, the dog proved to be so stubborn, Max wound up letting her sleep in the convertible overnight.

Both dogs were extremely intelligent, but Ruby was the smarter. She had a way of reacting to situations Max swore bordered on human. She could roll her eyes, dismiss you with a look, and like her brother, understood English and Portuguese, thanks to their breeder and trainer, a Brazilian friend of Max's named Portia. Max loved both her dogs and like the famous credit card, she never left home without them.

Max punched up the GPS screen on the dash. The display showed their destination to be less than a mile away. "Almost there, Os."

He whimpered mournfully.

"Poor baby," she said sympathetically and turned off the main road onto an unpaved one marked **PRIVATE**. The bumps and lumps tossed the Honda's occupants this way and that. Knowing all the bouncing wasn't helping Ossie's condition, Max did her best to avoid the deeper ruts, but it was next to impossible. For his sake, she prayed they wouldn't have to go much farther.

The fates were kind. Around the next bend the road dead ended at a large rusted wrought iron gate that looked to be about eight feet high. The address on the cylindrical mail box matched the address she'd been given for the Gary residence. "Looks like we're here," she said peering through the windshield at the gate. The fence stretched as far as she could see in both directions. Inside the fence was a forest of cloud kissing trees. She had no idea how far away the house might be, but she set aside her curiosity for now. Cutting the engine she opened her door and got out so she could open the hatch and tend to Ossie.

The liquid brown eyes staring up at her were as sad as a car sick child's. "Come on, Os. Let's get you out so you can feel better."

Ossie slowly lifted his one hundred and ten pound frame, then gingerly moved from the SUV to the ground. Max knelt beside him and hugged him close. Gently stroking his head, she said, "Let me get Ruby and I'll be right back."

Once Ruby bounded out of the seat, Max leaned into the car and dug out their bowls. Filling each with bottled water from the cooler, she let the dogs drink while she pulled out her cell phone. She wanted to let Dr. Gary know that she'd arrived, but she got his voice mail instead. She left a short message and waited to see if he'd call back.

Ten minutes later, she was still waiting. The dogs were done drinking so she dumped out the remaining water, restashed the bowls and checked out the gate. There was a call box on the front so she opened it and pushed the button labeled TALK.

After a few moments of silence she heard a female voice ask, "Yes?"

"I'm here to see Dr. Gary."

"He isn't seeing visitors today. Please call back and make an appointment."

Click.

Surprised by the abrupt ending, Max hit the button again, but this time there was no response. “Well,” she said, not pleased. Ruby was watching her. Ossie was lying on the ground, his head on his black paws.

Undeterred by the woman’s rude attitude, Max scanned the gate for the best way in. She noticed the thick rusted chains wrapped around the base of the gate and the ancient looking padlock anchoring them. “You think this is what passes for security around here, guys?”

Not waiting for an answer, Max walked back of the SUV and dug out a pair of long handled bolt cutters.

A few minutes later, she was driving slowly through the open gate while Ossie and Ruby loped alongside.

The narrow road twisted, turned and climbed. The pines lining the way were so tall that for part of the way the sunny day became shadowy as dusk. Once the trees cleared and the sun came out again Max was treated to a view of the sparkling blue waters of Lake Michigan that was awesome. Having traveled all over the world she’d seen her share of beautiful vistas and this one ranked in her top ten. She studied the house as it came into view. It was a large brick structure with Tudor lines that seemed more suited to an old world city like Boston. Her briefing materials from NIA mentioned that some of the houses along this stretch of the Lake Michigan coast were originally built during Prohibition as summer homes for Chicago’s mobsters. She wondered if this stately old mansion had been one of those. Max had a thing for historic architecture and looked forward to checking out the inside.

With that in mind she led her canine escorts up the wide steps and rang the bell. No response. Keeping her temper in check, she hit the bell again, leaning on it for a good fifteen seconds or so.

Moments later, the door was snatched open by a short, brown skinned young woman dressed like someone in the Junior League. She had on pearls, a grey silky blouse, a navy skirt and black patent stiletto pumps. The pearls weren't real, neither was the weave, but the hostility in her eyes sure was. She snapped, "We're not - ."

Then the words died away as she actually looked at Max and her attire.

Max didn't take offense. She assumed the household didn't get a lot of callers wearing sunglasses, black Stetsons and green snake skin boots, so she let Ms. Junior League get a good look, then said, "I'm here to see Dr. Gary."

The woman seemed to regain her composure and with it her bad attitude. "Dr. Gary doesn't see anyone. He's in the middle of a project." She cast a disgusted look down at Ruby and Ossie. "And he doesn't do dogs, at all."

Max had no idea who this weave wearing young woman might be. The child didn't look a day over 25 and there was nothing pertaining to her in the Gary file. On one level Max was glad to see Gary had someone guarding his door at least, but Max hadn't traveled all this way to be chased off by a Chihuahua in pearls. "Dr. Gary is expecting us."

"No, he isn't. I'm his secretary and there is nothing on his calendar. You'll have to make an appointment. Have a good day."

She made move to close the door in Max's face, but Max pushed it and her out of the way. "Excuse us," she said calmly.

Outraged and wide eyed, the woman shouted, “You can’t just bust in here!”

By now, Max and the dogs were already past her. Max told the dogs, “Find the doc, would you guys?”

The dogs split up and took off.

The woman yelled angrily, “I’m calling the police!”

Max didn’t break stride. “That’s your choice, but I’d hold off on that if I were you.”

Max passed room after room. All were empty. No furniture. No drapes. Not even a lawn chair. Why no furniture was a mystery, but it would have to wait. She had to find Dr. Gary first.

Down in his basement office, Dr. Adam Gary was more tired than he was willing to admit. He’d spent the last few days and nights in his lab trying to come up with a way to get the prototype to generate more heat and to do it for longer periods of time. Right now, Black Satin could only produce heat for a little over an hour. He knew he was on the edge of a breakthrough – he could taste it, but no matter how many times he fiddled with the formulas or studied the models generated by his computers, the solution wouldn’t holla. Looking at the equations on the monitor now, all he could say was, “What am I doing wrong?”

That’s when he saw the dog. It was a big Rotweiler and the sight of it standing in the open doorway where nothing had stood seconds ago rattled him so badly he almost fell off of his stool. Wondering how the animal had gotten in and where it had come from took a back seat to getting the hell away from it. His heart was pounding. He was

sweating and the basic instinct was to run, but he knew better. “Go!” he yelled at it. “Get out of here!”

The big dog raised its head and barked. Adam frantically scanned the paper – strewn office for something to throw or to threaten the canine with, then just as quickly changed his mind. Agitating the animal might provoke an attack.

Then suddenly another Rotweiler appeared in the doorway and beside it stood a tall woman with skin the color of old gold in the sunshine. She was wearing jeans. The thin straps of her low – cut, green tank top showed off bare arms that were sleek and toned. Dark glasses shaded her eyes and the permed hair showing beneath the black Stetson was short, brown and softly spiked. Adam was six foot three and she was tall enough to look him in the eyes.

“Good job, Ossie,” she was saying to the dog giving it a fond pat. Her soft voice was sweetened by a faint southern twang. Only after thanking the dog did she turn her attention to Adam. “I’m Max Blake. This is Ossie and Ruby.”

Before the shocked Adam could recover from that bombshell, Kaitlin marched in saying, “I told her you were working, and I told her you don’t do dogs.”

Adam was still trying to make sense out of this. *This is Max Blake? My security expert!* Not wanting Kaitlin to know the he didn’t have a clue as to what was going on, he said to her, “I’ve been expecting her.” It was a lie of course. He’d not been expecting a woman, and he certainly hadn’t been expecting dogs! He looked her up and down. Chandler’s people were supposed to be sending him a security expert, not a woman in a cowboy hat! “Get those dogs out of here,” he growled.

“They’re clean.”

“I don’t care.”

Though Max hid her irritation behind her shades, she didn’t like his attitude or his tone. The angry looks he kept shooting at Ossie and Ruby made her wonder if there was more going on here than just a fear of dog germs. She held off on quizzing him though. Instead she turned to Kaitlin and asked, “Can you walk them back out to my car, please? The doctor and I need to talk.” Max met his eyes and noted that his held not an ounce of welcome.

Max’s request had obviously offended Kaitlin, who drawled, “Adam tell her that I am *not* a dog walker.”

“Just go, Kaitlin, so she and I can talk.”

She huffed in response and crossed her arms.

Max knelt next to the dogs and said, “Kaitlin’s going to take you guys back outside, so be nice to her, and I’ll see you in a bit.”

The dogs looked up at Kaitlin with such expectant faces she seemed caught off guard for a moment. Then, with her young pretty face set tight with anger, she turned on her heels and stomped off. The dogs padded along silently in her wake.

Once she was gone, he said to Max, “Nobody told me you were a woman.”

Hoping to lighten the tension, Max tossed back, “You were expecting maybe mouse and squirrel?”

His stony face said he didn’t care that she had jokes. “Why wasn’t I told,” he asked pointedly.

Tough crowd, she said to herself. “Because it didn’t matter.” Max took a casual look around the small wood paneled space. Judging from all the racks cut into the walls it

must have served as a wine cellar once upon a time. The space was below ground and the bright bare bulbs strung across the ceiling for lighting made it feel like a cave. There were a couple of computer monitors, a few tables and chairs, and against one wall sat an old tan couch. Every flat surface was covered with stacks of papers and leaning piles of books.

“And the dogs?” he asked bluntly.

She turned back to him and the matter at hand. “What about them?”

“Do you always take your *pets* on a job?”

They’re not pets. They’re part of my team.”

“Oh really?” he drawled, sounding unimpressed.

“Yes, and their security clearance is probably higher than yours, doc.” Max didn’t see any beakers or any other nerd gear she imagined scientist types would have around, so she asked, “Where do you do your real work?”

That seemed to throw him for a moment, and it made her wonder if he’d thought her not smart enough to know this wasn’t his lab?

He finally answered “Through there.” He used his head to indicate the small door at the back of the room, “but it doesn’t matter because you won’t be staying.”

She casually folded her arms and gave him a cool smile. “Oh really?”

“Really.”

Max knew from the file that he’d be a good looking man, but it hadn’t prepared her for his arrogance. “They’re not going to replace me.”

“Yeah right.” He pulled out his cell phone.

Max shook her head at his obstinance and took a seat. Removing her Stetson, she finger combed her short hair. While he waited for the call to go through she went back to sizing him up. He was built. No Poindexter here. The way his razor cut moustache flowed around the sexy mouth and down into the jaw hugging beard gave him a dangerous outlaw sort of look. Had she met him at club she would have been subtly and sinuously all over him – until she realized he was a jerk. He looked tired though. There were dark circles under his brown eyes and weariness in his face. Whatever he was working on must be kicking his butt, she decided, and wondered when he'd last had a full night's sleep. Probably the last time she'd had one, she noted as she yawned and stretched. She'd gone from Osaka to LA to Texas and here to Michigan in what seemed like a day. Tired didn't begin to describe how she felt, but the fatigue took second place to knowing Mr. Wizard was going to have to eat his lab coat when he learned that she wasn't going anywhere.

Holding the phone to his ear, Adam waited for Myk Chandler to pick up. Adam was convinced he'd have no trouble getting rid of the woman watching him so silently from behind her shades. All he had to do was say the word and her butt would be outta here.

Wrong.

“What do you mean, you won't replace her?” he snapped into the phone. He watched her remove her sun glasses to reveal amused green eyes set in a face fine enough to stop a man in his tracks. Adam blinked. He turned away and forced himself to pay attention to what Myk was saying on the other end.

“The Department of Defense approved her, so she stays.”

“And I have no say?”

“She’s a former Marine. She worked Homicide here in Detroit. She cut her security teeth in the Columbian jungles.”

“I don’t care about her credentials,” he said evenly, “I want her and the damn dogs gone.”

“Adam,” Myk said reasonably, “she’s there for security, that’s all. Let the lady do her job so that you can do yours. Okay?”

For a second or so, Adam was too angry to answer, but finally said, “Yeah.”

“Good,” Myk replied sounding weary. “Now, anything else?”

“No.”

“Talk to you later then.”

“Later.” Adam closed the phone and studied the woman seated across the room. *This is a disaster waiting to happen*, he told himself. *A disaster*. Determined not to be distracted by how good she looked and not caring if she heard the annoyance in his voice, he said, “Kaitlin can show you where you’ll sleep. I have work to do.”

Adam then walked to the door of his lab and without another word, closed himself in.

Max sat in the silence wondering how much jail time she’d get for cutting off the nose of a top – secret government scientist? His attitude towards her didn’t really matter; she’d worked for bigger jerks. She just wished this one weren’t so seriously fine. Sighing at the injustice of it all, she stood up and strode off to find her Rotweillers and the Chihuahua.