

Kano  
By  
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Chapter One

"She's spoiled, self-centered and irresponsible!"

Dee Sinclair watched as her husband, John, threw up his hands and began to pace in front of her. It was apparent that their daughter, Skyler, had once again done something to infuriate her father and Dee knew she would need to act as a mediator. She sighed as she patted the seat next to her on the sofa.

"Sit down and tell me calmly what she's done this time."

"I don't want to sit down. Where is she?"

"Probably getting dressed. I heard the shower running a few minutes ago."

He shoved a fistful of papers in front of her face. "I found these in the trunk of her car. She owes nearly a thousand dollars in parking and speeding tickets."

"If my memory serves me correct, John, you were the one who encouraged Sky to learn to drive. Took her out when she was only fourteen. Then, to make matters worse, you were determined to buy her that noisy silver Corvette for her birthday last month. How do you expect her to behave responsibly when you indulge her every whim? She's never worked a day in her life and she's twenty-one."

He lowered his eyes and sat down next to his wife. "You're right as usual, Dee, but you know how much Sky means to me. I'd give her the world if I could."

Dee put her arm around him knowing he was speaking the truth. Skyler was their only child and John had spoiled her since the day she was born, showering her with dolls and toys, buying her a pony before she learned how to walk, and accelerating his generosity with each passing year. Perhaps it was only natural, or a habit, for him to buy the Corvette when Skyler insisted on having one.

Dee knew she was also guilty of indulging her with dance, piano and riding lessons and buying her the finest clothing from toddler to teenager. Hadn't she given Skyler her own charge card when she turned sixteen? And wasn't the card continually at the five thousand dollar limit? There had always been a maid and butler to tend to her needs and tutors to help with the less than perfect grades in high school. Skyler had finished two years in nursing school, but even that was put on hold when she decided she no longer wanted to become a nurse.

Yes, Dee conceded as she hugged her husband, we've

certainly given our little girl everything she could ever want and now it looks as though we must learn to accept the consequences.

John Sinclair had fallen in love with Delores "Dee" Skyler the moment he saw her on the college campus at Stony Brook, and both families were pleased with their marriage four years later. John had come from a wealthy family, as had Dee, and their union further cemented the wealth of the two families. Finishing college and medical school with honors, John had worked hard to achieve success as one of New York's finest vascular surgeons, and Dee had become equally successful as Assistant Administrator at Queens General Hospital. Their mansion, on the outskirts of the prestigious community of Millers Run, was the only home Skyler had ever known and her shiny new Corvette had found a home parked among a Mercedes, Jaguar and BMW in the four-car garage.

They glanced up when Skyler appeared in the doorway.

"Why the long faces?" she asked, casually strolling into the living room.

Skyler was more beautiful with each passing day, and John felt a lump of fatherly pride form in his throat as he studied her. Inheriting the best of her parents' features, she reminded him so much of how Dee looked twenty years ago, and he cleared his throat in an attempt to sound stern.

"We have tickets to discuss, young lady."

"Oh," she said, lowering her eyes. "I was wondering when I'd have to explain them."

"Did you think hiding them in the trunk of your car would make them go away?"

She looked into his eyes and the corner of her mouth turned up slightly. "No. I was hoping you wouldn't find them."

"How were you going to pay for them?" he shot back.

She winced at his tone. "I'm sorry, Dad. Suppose it was pretty stupid of me."

He stood up and held out the tickets in front of him while Dee wrapped her fingers firmly around the waistband of his slacks to hold him back.

"You owe close to a thousand dollars. Were you going to wait until they revoked your license? Or came and got the car?"

His mood softened when he saw her eyes fill with tears. "You've got to realize, Sky, that you can't do as you please. Most of these tickets are for parking on Main Street, and you're lucky the car wasn't towed."

"I know, Dad. If I promise not to do it again, will you forgive me?"

She stood up and hugged him. Watching them together, Dee knew John would simply pay the tickets and forget about them. It

was impossible for him to fight with Skyler, especially when she used tears as ammunition.

He pushed her away and looked into her eyes.

"I'll pay them this time, but if you get any more, I'll take the Vet away from you. One month for each ticket."

"A month? You can't be serious."

"You heard me. One month for each ticket." He looked over at Dee. "I'm going to hit a few golf balls before dinner."

"Don't throw your back out," Dee called after him as he slammed the door. She turned her attention to Skyler. "He's serious this time."

Ignoring her, Skyler walked over to one of the full-length mirrors in the foyer and pulled her hair away from her face.

"Do you think I should cut my hair? Holly had hers done and it looks adorable on her."

"Don't you dare. You have beautiful hair, Sky."

"Maybe you're right," she said as she dropped her hair, and it resumed its position of waving softly around her face. Thick and auburn, like the bark of a cinnamon tree, it cascaded in graceful curves down her shoulders to the center of her back. Her skin, white and creamy, except for the natural dusty rose in the hollow of her cheeks, emphasized huge, deep sapphire eyes, heavily fringed with lush dark lashes. Her full rounded lips covered straight snow-white teeth and when she smiled, a small dimple formed in one of her cheeks.

Pensively contemplating her profile, she turned her attention to her body and was pleased with her reflection. Tall and slim, her hips tapered into long lithe legs and her full breasts complemented a flat, narrow waist. She was fortunate to be able to eat anything she desired without gaining weight and unlike Holly, her closest friend, she never had to count calories or exercise.

Holly Chandler, on the other hand, existed on salads and aerobic sessions in a constant struggle to maintain her weight of one hundred and three on a five foot two inch frame. They had been friends since grade school and shared everything together, including losing their virginity on precisely the same night in their senior year of high school.

For Skyler, it had happened during a party at Holly's house when Holly had escaped to a cabana by the pool with her date and Skyler had sneaked into the garage with a boy that she met earlier that evening. It had been cramped and awkward for Skyler to slip out of her sweater and jeans in the back seat of Holly's father's Rolls Royce. Then, in the young man's haste to quell the mounting passion in his body, he had entered her swiftly, frightening her and causing her to cry out when pain ran through her. He was finished seconds later and humiliated her further by

yanking open the door and jumping out of the car, leaving her with only the bright red stain of her virginal blood on the white leather seat of the Rolls.

She refused to elaborate on any of the details to Holly the following morning when they awoke early and tiptoed into the garage with a pail of water to scrub the seat of the Rolls. Glancing over at her, Holly said gently, "I'm sorry it turned out so awful for you, Sky."

"Forget it."

"He was a complete ass, but they're not all like that. Last night, with Pete, it was fantastic."

Skyler shot her a critical look. "Must you be so goddamn happy?"

"Sorry."

Sighing, Skyler dropped the sponge. "No, it's me that should apologize. At least one of us had a good time losing her virginity. Tell me about it."

"Are you sure?"

"I am somewhat curious."

"When Pete and I did it, the room began to spin around like a top and it felt so good when he touched me."

"Did it hurt?"

"A little. But then he kissed me and I didn't think about the pain anymore. His lips were so soft and he kept saying how crazy he was about me. I think I've fallen love with him."

Skyler picked up the sponge and began to rub the seat again. "Don't be a fool. It's just because he was the first one to screw you."

"What a horrible thing to say."

She shrugged. "It's the truth. If someone else came along, you'd forget about Pete."

"Maybe I am in love with him," Holly said indignantly. "People do fall in love these days, you know. I remember there was a time when you couldn't wait to fall in love."

"That was before last night. You won't catch me acting silly and goofy like you just because I have sex with someone. And after what I went through, I doubt very much whether I'll ever have sex again."

Holly's party had taken place almost two years ago, but the memory of that night and the sight of the Rolls still sent a shiver of regret down Skyler's spine. She had dated since then, but preferred to remain safely in groups. Aside from a goodnight peck on the cheek from an overzealous young man, she refused to let anyone touch her.

Now, surveying her well-formed body in the mirror, she thought about Holly's birthday party tonight and vowed she'd make pleasant conversation, perhaps dance, but no one would

seduce or tempt her into doing anything more than offering one friendly goodnight kiss.

"Mom, I've got to run," she said suddenly and grabbed her purse.

"You will think hard about what your father said, won't you?"

"Sure, no more tickets even if I have to walk the length of Main Street."

"Will you be home for dinner?"

"No. Holly's party starts at seven-thirty, but I promised to help her with her makeup, so I'll leave here around six. I'm off to the dry cleaners to pick up my dress, and then I've got to scoot over to her house to drop off a pair of shoes. I'll be home after that, but only to hurry and get dressed myself."

"Remember. No speeding," Dee called out, but Skyler had already slammed the front door and was running to her car.

Since it was an unusually warm mid-September day, she put the top down on the convertible and turned the radio up as she sailed along the freeway. Once she hit Main Street, traffic stopped and then crawled, and she nervously tapped the steering wheel as she waited to move. A young man in a pickup truck next to her honked and grinned when she looked over, but she made a face at him and turned back around. At last traffic began to move and spying a space in front of the cleaners, she contemplated whether or not to park in the restricted zone. Reasoning that she was already late, and would only be in the shop for a few minutes, she pulled in.

Once inside, she handed the salesgirl the stub for the dress, threw money on the counter, jerked open the door, and gasped when she spotted a policeman standing in front of her car.

She watched as he flicked off the top of a ballpoint pen and began to scribble on a pad.

"I'm here," she said quickly, but he didn't even look up.

"That's nice."

"Please, let me jump in and move the car."

"Oh, you'll have to move the car," he said finally looking at her, "but you're still going to get a ticket."

She sighed and laid her dress across the back seat of the car. "I was only parked here for a minute or so. Can't you give me a break?"

She knew by his icy stare that it would be difficult to talk him out of the ticket, but decided to try. "Listen, I know I deserve the ticket, but can't you please help me out this one little time? If I leave quickly, I promise never to park illegally again."

When he smiled, she thought he was weakening, but he ripped

off the ticket from his pad and handed it to her. "Could have let you slide, Ma'am, except I recognized the car. Gave you a parking ticket last month. See that sign up there? This is a no parking zone for a reason. Main Street is too congested, even for your little bitty car. If you respected the law, you wouldn't be in this jam."

"But I was only in the shop for a few seconds. Can't you please find it in your heart to tear this up and let one very sorry driver go?" she asked with a pout, wondering if perhaps she still had a chance.

"No I can't, Miss Sinclair," he said, tipping his hat. "Have a nice day."

She watched as he got into his patrol car and once he was out of sight, she crumpled up the ticket and tossed it in a nearby trashcan. "Go pick on someone else," she said hotly, jumped in the front seat and sped off.

She arrived at Holly's house a few minutes later and parked in the circular driveway towards the edge of the property. Still angry, she slammed the door and was about to walk up to the house when she thought she heard music playing on the side of the huge mansion in the direction of the family's prize rose garden. Walking over and peering over a tall hedge, she saw a man digging a hole in the garden as music played on a nearby radio.

Shirtless, with sweat pouring off his brawny chest, she watched as he wiped his brow with the back of his hand. Lifting the shovel filled with dirt, he swung it over his muscular shoulder and a gold medallion around his neck caught a ray of sunlight when he moved his body.

Her eyes traveled up to his face and she caught her breath when he suddenly looked in her direction. Ducking down, she peeked over the hedge again and saw that he was ruggedly handsome with large chestnut eyes, thickly arched eyebrows, and a strong profile. His generous mouth softened the severity of finely chiseled features, and there was a dimple in the center of his chin adding boyish charm to an otherwise manly face. His full dark hair flowed from his head like the mane of a seasoned lion, curling just below his ears and waving across his forehead, and his cheeks were either smudged with dirt or a rough late-day beard had begun to form. Her eyes traveled to the lower part of his body. His tight jeans, hugging robust thighs, had slipped slightly down his hips exposing his navel.

Mesmerized by his good looks, she tried to get a better view, but suddenly lost her footing and fell backwards onto the ground. Jumping up and brushing off her slacks, she looked back in the direction of the hedge and saw him staring down at her with an amused grin on his face.

"Hurt yourself?" he asked.

She felt her cheeks grow hot. "No, I'm fine," she said, trying to sound casual. "I heard the music and was curious."

The corners of his mouth turned up slightly. "You were watching me. Admit it."

She looked away from him. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Wait there."

She watched as he made his way to the edge of the garden. He had an air of authority about him as he walked towards her, and when he reached out and pulled a blade of grass from her hair, the touch of his fingers sent a spark throughout her body, causing her to take a step backwards.

His gaze, riveted on her eyes, moved boldly down her body and then returned to her face. "That's better," he said. "I wouldn't want to be the cause of seeing that beautiful red hair all mussed up. You shouldn't have been spying on me though."

"You really don't know your place, do you?" she asked curtly.

His smile disappeared. "My place?"

"Gardeners, like all hired help, should be seen and not heard. Weren't you taught that before you took the job?"

He folded his arms across his chest and a huge tattoo of a spitting serpent covered his right upper arm. "Tell me more about my place and how you think gardeners should behave."

Her eyes lowered to the damp mound of thick curly hair on his chest and the glistening medallion, but she caught herself and turned away. "I don't have time to stand here with you."

"Put the top up," he called out in back of her and she spun around.

"What?"

"That's your Corvette in front of the house, isn't it? I've adjusted the sprinklers and either put the top up or move the car."

"Wait until I'm gone and then turn them on."

He grinned. "Can't. They're on a timer."

"Then fix them."

"You're a spoiled bitch, aren't you?"

She glared at him. "I'll have your job for that remark," she said, spinning around and walking briskly up to the front door.

Carsons, the butler, opened the door. "Miss Holly is in the den," he said as she stomped past him.

"It's about time you got here," Holly said, spotting her in the doorway.

"I'd have been here sooner if it wasn't for your rude gardener."

Holly's smile disappeared and she cocked her head to one

side. "Kenneth was rude to you?"

"No, not Kenneth. That other guy you hired to dig up the rose garden."

Suddenly Carsons appeared in the doorway and he looked agitated. "Miss Skyler, you'd better put the top up on your car. The sprinklers are wetting the inside."

Skyler ran over to the window. "Oh, God, I can't believe he actually did it!"

"Give me the keys," Carsons said, and she tossed them to him.

"Honestly, Holly, between calling me a bitch and now this. I think your father has every right to fire the gardener."

"I still don't know who you're talking about, Sky. What gardener?"

The front door flew open a few seconds later and Carsons walked in, drenched from the sprinklers, with the stranger close behind.

"Him! He's the one who called me a bitch," Skyler said, pointing.

The stranger sank into one of the chairs and Holly burst out laughing. "He's not the gardener! Royce, get up before you get the furniture wet."

Skyler watched as he stood up and she noticed that he had an amused grin on his face. "I don't understand."

"Royce is my cousin. He's visiting us for a few days."

Skyler glared at him with burning, reproachful eyes. "Why didn't you tell me who you were?"

He shrugged. "You didn't ask."

"I suppose you enjoy making a fool out of me."

"I'd like to take credit for that, but you don't need any help from me," he said, walking out of the room and leaving a trail of muddy footprints.

"I apologize for Royce," Holly said, "He can be a bastard at times."

"I didn't know you had a cousin visiting."

"He's been overseas for the past five years, mostly in Africa, which I suppose may explain why he can be rough around the edges. Did he really call you a bitch?"

Skyler settled into one of the chairs. "Guess I had it coming when I assumed he was part of the hired help. Does he always dig up the rose garden when he visits?"

"No, but he's a civil engineer and our sprinklers weren't working exactly to his satisfaction. Did you remember to bring the shoes?"

"Oh, I almost forgot," said Skyler, jumping up. "They're out in the car."

She returned a few seconds later holding a pair of soggy



black suede pumps.

"Oh, Sky, they're ruined. I'm sorry."

She threw the pumps on the floor. "Not as sorry as I am. The white silk dress I was planning to wear to the party was also in the car. The water will likely leave stains."

Holly's brow shot up in surprise. "You're taking this awfully well. I would have thought by now you would be absolutely livid and ready to kill my cousin."

Skyler lowered her eyes. "Will he be at the party tonight?"

"Why? You're not interested in him, are you?"

"He is attractive, in a brutish sort of way."

"*Wild Man*. That's what the family calls him. He's always been unconventional and unpredictable. Never serious about anything or anyone, except his precious work in Africa. My aunt thinks he travels the globe to escape commitment. When things get too complicated for him, he leaves. He's brash and free-spirited, but I suppose that's why I adore him. He has that effect on everyone."

"I only said he was somewhat attractive. He's certainly not my type," Skyler protested, but she knew she was lying to her best friend.

Recalling his deep, brooding eyes, and the sensuous way he moved towards her in the garden, like a sleek black panther prowling around its prey, she imagined he was the sexiest, most attractive man she had ever seen. It was true that there was a maddening arrogance about him, and he had certainly taken pleasure in embarrassing her, yet she couldn't seem to get him out of her mind. She shook her head trying to clear it.

"I'd better get going," she said absently. "Still need to find something to wear tonight and you need another pair of shoes."

"Do you have another pair of black suede?"

"Will patent leather do?"

"Sure. But what will you do for a dress?"

Skyler grabbed her purse and headed for the door. "Maybe Jean Paul's will have something. See you around six."

Sitting in the Corvette, she felt water from the seat quickly soak through her jeans. "I'll get even with you for this, Royce," she said under her breath, "if it's the last thing I do."

Crawling again along Main Street, she spotted Jean Paul's Dress Shop, pulled into a space in a no parking zone and jumped out of the car, vowing to spend only ten minutes inside. An hour later, pleased with her purchase, she left the dress shop with a tight, short, red jersey dress cut daringly low in front and crossed at the waist.

"Oh, no," she cried when she spied a ticket on the

windshield. "Not again!" Examining the ticket, she crumpled it and tossed it on the ground before driving off.

A steamy hot bath an hour later rejuvenated her spirits and she splashed herself with expensive French perfume. Carefully applying a touch of mascara and rouge, she finished off her face with a thin coat of apple red lipstick. She pinned her hair on top of her head, trying to look sophisticated, but later decided it only made her look silly and removed the pins to let it wave softly around her face. Throwing the red dress over her head, she smoothed it down her hips and liked the way it clung to her body and showed off her legs.

She tried to dodge her mother on the way out, but Dee met her at the front door.

"New dress?" she asked, and her eyes clearly disapproved.

"I stopped at Jean Paul's on the way home."

"It's a little short, isn't it? And tight."

"I can't wear a nun's habit to Holly's party, Mom. By the way, I'm sleeping over her house tonight, so don't worry about me when it gets late."

Her hand was on the front doorknob when she suddenly remembered the wet seat in the Corvette. "Could I borrow the Jag tonight?"

"Why? You didn't smack up the Vet, did you?" Dee asked, her voice rising in alarm.

"The front seat is wet."

"Wet? We haven't had rain in over a week."

"It's a long story about some wayward sprinklers. May I use the Jag?"

Dee removed a set of keys from her purse and handed them to her. "You didn't get any tickets today, did you?"

Skyler took the keys from her and turned away so her mother wouldn't see her eyes. "I remembered Daddy's threats. See you tomorrow," she said, quickly leaving the house.

Holly was upstairs in her bedroom when she arrived at the Chandler mansion.

"That dress is dynamite, Sky."

"Thanks. Oh, damn. I completely forgot about the shoes."

"Don't worry. I decided to wear the green dress with the lace on the sleeves, and I've got shoes to match."

"Want me to do your makeup now?"

"Sure. Run down the hall to my mother's bedroom and get her cosmetic bag on the bureau. She's got some new eye shadow I want to try."

Skyler walked into Holly's mother's massive bedroom and heard the shower running in the bathroom. The door was slightly ajar and as she got closer, she could make out a man's figure behind the frosted glass door. He turned and when she saw that

it was Royce, she quickly slipped behind the door.

Peeking in again, she watched as he extended his massive arms in front of him and leaned his body against the shower. Letting out a deep moan as the pulsating spray of water beat against his sore shoulders, he turned sideways and her eyes swept over the rich outline of his form. Beginning at his chest, she worked her way down to his narrow waist, and then to the firm line of his thigh, and when she witnessed the magnificent outline of the power of his maleness, her heart began to beat wildly.

He turned off the shower and she quickly backed up, grabbed the cosmetic bag, and ran to Holly's room. She struggled with Holly's eye makeup and had to redo it when her trembling hands smeared the eyeliner. No matter how she tried to concentrate on what she was doing, she couldn't get Royce out of her mind.

At seven-fifteen, she and Holly went downstairs and Ethan, Holly's father, whistled when they entered the ballroom.

"Am I dreaming or did two angels descend upon the earth?"

"Oh, Dad, stop embarrassing us," Holly said, but she adored the attention. Her short ash blonde hair was teased high and framed her face attractively. Skyler had worked miracles with makeup. Holly deliberately left the two top buttons of her dress open at the neckline hoping to draw some attention to her bosom and the magic the padded bra performed.

"Ethan, leave the girls alone," said Mary Chandler, shooting her husband a disapproving look. "You both look gorgeous. Why don't we go into the kitchen and take a peek at the birthday cake cook baked for tonight?"

Ignoring his wife, Ethan put his arm around Skyler. "Have you met our house guest yet?"

Holly giggled. "*Wild Man* lived up to his name, Dad. Royce already called Sky a bitch."

Ethan shook his head. "He's been too long in the bush. Come with me and let's see if I can't get him to apologize to you."

He led Skyler into the den and Royce, sprawled out on the sofa watching television, looked up briefly when he spied them come in.

"I want you to apologize to this young lady," Ethan said, shoving Skyler in front of him. "She's too pretty to be treated so rudely. If he refuses to apologize, Sky, let me know and I'll kick him out on his ass," Ethan said with a grin, walking out of the room.

Royce stood up and they were silent for a moment, each sizing up the other. He picked up a glass from the coffee table and emptied the contents with one swallow. Dressed in white, loose-fitting slacks tied at the waist with a rope, his thin, white-gauze shirt was carelessly unbuttoned exposing his chest

and the gold medallion she had noticed earlier. His hair slicked back and still damp from the shower, curled behind his ears and his cheeks were clean-shaven.

Slowly and seductively, his eyes traveled down the length of her body and then rested on her face. "Sexy dress," he said. "How about a drink?"

"What are you drinking?" she asked as she watched him walk over to the bar.

"Dewar's. Straight."

"I'll have the same."

He looked over at her with a raised eyebrow. "Sure I can't add a little soda water to soften it up a bit?"

She cleared her throat, realizing he had seen through her again. She didn't even know what Dewar's was. "Please."

He turned his attention back to the bar and splashed some scotch into two tumblers. Filling one with soda water, he tossed in a few cubes.

As he came closer, the intoxicating sweet scent of his cologne saturated the air. She lowered her eyes when he handed her the drink. She took a sip and the strong liquor tasted bitter and burned the inside of her mouth. She forced herself to swallow it, and then took another sip.

"You're petrified of me, aren't you?" he asked suddenly.

She blushed. "Of course not."

He took the glass from her and laid it on the table. "But I tell you, you are afraid. Like a frightened sparrow in the path of a hungry cat." He cupped her chin and raised her eyes to his. His fingers brushed against her cheek and she trembled.

"Ethan said I should apologize, but all I want to do is kiss you," he whispered.

He lowered his head, but stopped at her lips. He reached for a paper napkin on the table and pressed it gently against her parted lips and her red lipstick smeared against the napkin.

"I don't want anything between your lips and mine when I kiss you," he said.

His kiss was soft and tender at first, but then his lips forced hers open, and when his tongue hungrily searched her mouth, it was strange yet wonderful, and she felt a tingle run through her. He pulled her body to his and his thighs rubbed against hers, in a swirling motion, and he seemed to savor every curve of her body.

Frightened, yet curious, she didn't stop him when he reached up and covered her breast with his hand. Gently squeezing the nipple, it hardened beneath his fingertips. Impatient to touch her bare flesh, he slipped his hand inside her dress and then under her lacy bra, but she jerked when his hand touched her skin.

"Stop," she cried, pushing him away.

He spun around and his back was to her. "Get out of here before I do something foolish."

She hesitated at the door, momentarily regretting she had stopped him, but then silently stepped into the hall as Ethan walked by.

"Sky, you look upset."

"No, I'm fine, Mr. Chandler," she said, gaining her composure. "Have guests started to arrive?"

"A few. You're sure Royce didn't say something else to upset you?"

She shook her head. "Not at all. Excuse me, please; I'm going to make my way to the ballroom."

She straightened her rumpled dress, and as she walked through the house, she shivered, remembering the way he had kissed her and touched her breast. The fire he ignited had been instantaneous and all consuming, and now the area between her legs throbbed with desire. He was brash and had taken liberties with her and she knew she should have slapped his face for the way he had behaved. Yet, all she could think about was being held again in his arms.

By nine o'clock, music blared in the ballroom and couples were gyrating to the sound of a live band on the dance floor. Skyler kept scanning the room for Royce, but he never showed up. She met Holly in the kitchen.

"Sky, you haven't danced all night and it isn't because you haven't been asked. Jack and Bobby Brenner both complained to me that you turned them down when they asked you."

"Where's Royce? I haven't seen him."

"He left around eight. Said something about having a date with Linda."

Skyler tried to conceal her disappointment with a forced smile. "Really? I would have thought he would have stayed for your birthday party. Who's Linda?"

"I've never met her, but they went to high school together. Every time he's in town, he makes a point of stopping by and seeing her. Even has her name tattooed on his arm."

Skyler was silent, and Holly looked at her with a puzzled expression. "You don't seem yourself tonight. Has Royce done something else to upset you?"

"Is he in love with Linda?"

A look of recognition crossed Holly's face and she folded her arms in front of her. "I warned you about my irresistible cousin."

Color crept into Skyler's cheeks. "I've never met anyone like him. He's so impulsive. So dangerous."

"That's exactly why everyone calls him Wild Man."

"Tell me more about him."

"I'd rather see you interested in someone at the party. Royce isn't your type."

"Too late," she said weakly. "Here I was lecturing you about making a fool out of yourself and now I find myself behaving like an ass over someone I met a few hours ago."

"I'll tell you about him on one condition."

"Which is?"

"That you put any serious thoughts about him completely out of your mind. He'll break your heart if you get involved with him. Anyway, he's leaving in three days and won't be back for a very long time. Can't you forget you ever met him?"

"No."

Holly sighed and pointed to the kitchen table. "Then sit down." She filled two glasses with wine and handed one to her. "Maybe this will help."

"Talk," Skyler said, taking a sip.

"Let's see, where should I begin? He's the son of my father's brother, Jason. Uncle Jason died when Royce was around twelve years old, which would have made Kyle around sixteen. Yes, that's right. Royce is twenty-six now and Kyle is thirty."

"Who's Kyle?"

"His older brother. Kyle's actually responsible for getting Royce so hooked on working in Africa. He left home shortly after Royce graduated from high school and took a job with IBF—the International Building Foundation. At my aunt's urging, Royce visited him one summer in between classes and fell in love with Africa, too. Kyle runs the entire West African regional program."

"What does Royce do?"

"Kyle travels all over Africa looking for projects and Royce builds them. Royce's next job is to build a new hospital in northern Nigeria. Separating my cousins works out well because they despise one another. Something happened years ago involving Linda, but no one talks about it."

Skyler lowered her eyes and Holly reached across the table and patted her hand. "Please don't get involved with Royce."

"Is she the only one he's ever been in love with?"

Holly laughed out loud. "Royce isn't in love with her or anyone else. Oh, I don't doubt for a moment that he has no scruples when it comes to making love to women on every continent, but I doubt whether he's ever loved any of them. Kyle's the one who's caring and sensitive. If it were Kyle you wanted, I'd encourage you. But Royce? He's a heartbreaker and he'll never change."

Mary Chandler walked into the kitchen and put her hands on her hips. "Holly, your guests are in the ballroom and you're

here. Don't you think that's rude?"

Holly jumped up and so did Skyler. "Sorry, Mom. Is it time for the cake yet?"

"It would be a good idea to blow out the candles before everyone went home. I'll tell Carsons to light it and bring it out."

Skyler smiled thinly at Holly. "I haven't been much of a co-hostess, have I? Keeping you from your guests on your birthday."

"The night is still young, and if I have to push you into Jack's arms, you're going to dance till the heels on your shoes wear out," Holly said as they walked hand-in-hand into the ballroom.

At three o'clock, the party broke up and Royce still hadn't arrived home. Holly lent Skyler a silk nightgown and she climbed into bed in one of the mansion's many spare rooms. Thinking about Royce and the fire he had awakened in her, she soon drifted off to sleep.

She felt someone touch her cheek, then brush a lock of hair away from face. When she opened her eyes, she saw a dark figure sitting on the edge of the bed. Startled, she jumped up and pulled the thin blanket up to her chin. She saw that the figure was Royce.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

He pressed his finger to his lips. "Hush! It's almost five o'clock in the morning. Want to go fishing with me?"

"Fishing?"

"I'm going to take my uncle's boat out. Bluefish are good this time of year. Come and keep me company."

"Why don't you take Linda?" she said and saw the white outline of his teeth when he grinned at her.

"You're jealous. I like that."

She felt her cheeks grow hot and was glad he couldn't see. "Do you always kiss and run? I thought you'd at least have the decency to apologize to me at the party."

"Apologize? For what?"

"For forcing yourself on me. Or have you already forgotten what you did to me in the den?"

Rubbing his chin, he said, "Funny, I don't remember it happening quite that way. Wasn't it the other way around? You were the one half-naked throwing yourself at me."

She reached out to slap his face, but his hand caught her arm.

"I like teasing you. Come with me," he said.

His grip on her arm tightened and she tried to pull away, but couldn't. "You're hurting me," she said, and he let her go.

He stood up and looked down at her. "Have you ever seen a

sunrise?"

She thought about it and giggled. "I never get up before noon."

"Can you find one of Holly's swimsuits to wear on the boat?"

"I suppose. But I don't fit into her jeans and it's chilly at this ridiculous hour of the morning."

He unbuttoned and slipped out of his gauze shirt and handed it to her. "Put this on. It's a little thin, but I'll do my best to keep you warm. Hurry and get dressed or we'll miss the sunrise."

He left the room and she jumped out of bed. Tiptoeing into Holly's room, she found a black bikini hanging in the closet and slipped it on. She put her arms through Royce's shirt and hugged it tightly against her body as the fragrance of his cologne lingered in the air.

He was outside waiting for her in Ethan Chandler's jeep and she jumped in. "The shirt looks better on you than me," he said as he pulled out of the driveway.

They were silent as he drove through the deserted streets. When he stopped at a traffic light and shifted gears, his hand brushed against her bare thigh and she trembled. Glancing over at her, he grinned and apologized, but she didn't hear him. She was too busy concentrating on the dimple in his chin and the way his eyes flashed when he spoke.

When they reached the marina, he helped her into the sixty-foot cabin cruiser christened, "Holly's Choice," and handed her a brown paper bag. "Put this below," he said. When she peeked inside, she saw a fresh bottle of Dewar's, chocolate covered donuts, and a box of slim cigars.

"Very nourishing," she said dryly, and then went downstairs to unpack the bag.

She joined him back on deck as he started up the engine and lifted the anchor. Out on the ocean a few minutes later, he pointed to where the earth met the sky.

"Look at how beautiful a sunrise can be, Skyler."

She stared at the huge bright orange ball, its rays jutting upwards filling the sky, and she realized she had never seen anything so breathtaking before. The dark outline of a flock of seagulls flew towards the sun and their haunting cries muffled the hum of the boat's engine.

"This was worth getting up early for," she said.

"Yes, my dear, there is life before noon after all. I could use a cigar. Light me one."

She went downstairs, grabbed the box of cigars from the bag, and found a lighter on the sink. Back on deck, she struggled to light one as he patiently watched, but the breeze



kept blowing out the flame. Finally it caught.

When he pointed his chin towards her, she slipped the cigar between his lips. He took a few puffs, and when he saw her yawn, he motioned towards the stairs. "Go down and get some sleep. Once we're further out, I'll hook up the rod and grab a little shuteye myself."

"I suppose I am a little sleepy."

"Come here first," he said.

He pulled her close and kissed her and her body stirred again feeling the touch of his lips. Suddenly wanting more, she bravely opened her mouth and probed the inside of his with her tongue, and it took him by surprise. He pulled away, slowed the boat, and then stopped it completely.

He yanked his snug tee shirt over his head and his smoldering eyes locked with hers. "Touch me," he said as he laid her hands against his chest.

She caressed his rippling, taut muscles, and quivered as she felt his warm, smooth flesh. Tracing her hands up to his neck, she slid them slowly down his shoulders and felt the wisps of hair on his arms. Her hands took hold of his and she laid her head against the curly dark mound of damp hair on his chest.

"Go downstairs," he said, "and I'll follow in a few minutes."

She did, and spotting the bed already laid out for her inside the cabin, she stretched across it and fell asleep. She awoke an hour or two later and not seeing him, climbed the stairs. With the motor off and anchor down, the boat rocked gently from side to side, and she saw he had fallen asleep in a chair by the steering wheel with a fishing rod tied around his wrist. She tiptoed closer and, sensing her presence, he opened his eyes.

"You looked so peaceful on the bed, I didn't want to wake you," he said, smiling up at her.

"Catch anything?"

"Look in the pail."

He had caught two large bluefish. She smiled. "I see even fish are drawn to you."

"My throat's dry. Go down and get me a glass of scotch."

She cocked her head to one side. "It's not even noon yet. Wouldn't coffee be better?"

"I need something stronger running through my veins. If you want coffee, there's a pot down there."

"I suppose you want me to light another smelly cigar, too?"

"Naturally."

She went down into the hull, filled a tumbler with scotch and a few cubes, and brought it to him. Finishing half the glass with one swallow, he pursed his lips when she lit another cigar

for him.

"Ah, could a man ask for anything more?" he said, leaning back in the chair.

With his hair casually spilling across his forehead, she thought he looked even handsomer than the night before. He pulled her over to stand between his legs and she saw that the top button of his jeans was undone. He tossed the cigar in the ocean.

"It's getting warm. How about a swim?" he asked, but she shook her head.

"Me neither," he said, gazing deeply into her eyes, and then he slid the zipper of his jeans down. "This is what I want." He took her hand and guided it inside his jeans to where he wanted her to touch him.

She inhaled deeply when she felt his body, hard and pulsating, beneath her palm, and she closed her eyes. She held him gently at first, afraid she would hurt him, but when she began to firmly stroke him and heard him moan, a delicious tremor ran through her.

He pushed her away. "Go downstairs," he said, untying the rope around his wrist and she ran downstairs.

She faced him in the cabin and he reached behind her and unhooked the top of her swimsuit. It fell to the floor and she tried to cover her breasts with her hands, but he brushed them away.

"Don't ever be ashamed with me," he said.

Cradling her full, lush breasts, he lowered his head and kissed each of them, flicking his tongue gently over each nipple, bringing the darkened tips to crested peaks. Edging her back towards the rumpled bed, he slipped off his jeans and she caught her breath when she saw the strength of his fully aroused body; taut, firm, and ready to make love to her.

Stretched out next to her, he slipped the bottom of her swimsuit down her slender legs, and she bit down hard on her lip to stifle the outcry of pleasure she knew awaited her. Propped on one arm, he leaned over and gently pushed her thighs apart, deliberately slow to arouse and please her, and when his fingers searched and found the innermost core of her body, she abandoned her shyness with a cry of delight for he had taken her to a height of passion she had never known before.

She closed her eyes, lost in the sweet ecstasy of his touch. He climbed over her and slowly lowered himself on top of her body. She jerked when she felt him enter her, but then her body seemed to catch on fire. Her nails dug into his back as he moved from side to side, and then up and down, and as he plunged deeper and deeper into her, waves of erotic pleasure rippled through her. She wanted more, yet her body cried out for relief,

and finally, she heard him groan and then felt him shake when his passion exploded inside her.

With his fingers wound tightly through her hair, he peered into her eyes when his breathing returned to normal. "You've set my soul on fire."

"Holly said you would break my heart. Maybe she's right."

He slid off her and cradled her in his arms. "What else did she tell you about me?"

"Will you?"

"Will I what?"

"Break my heart?"

He touched her chin and brought her lips up to his. "Don't believe everything you hear."

She laid her head against his chest. He was extraordinary and had taken her body to a state of euphoric pleasure. Holly's warning would have to wait.

He got up a few minutes later and unashamedly walked naked upstairs to check on the fishing line. "Get me a drink, Sky," he called down to her and she jumped out of bed.

Slipping on his shirt, she poured him another scotch. He was still naked, fiddling with the line, when she handed him the glass. Running her hand smoothly over his shoulders and down the center of his back, she examined the tattoo on his arm and saw the name, "*Linda*," in black script lettering under the serpent.

"Who's Linda?" she asked.

He took a swallow before answering. "A good friend from high school," he said as he re-baited the hook on the fishing rod.

"You were with her last night, and her name is tattooed on your arm. That makes her more than just a good friend from high school."

He looked over at her and his smile disappeared. "Don't you believe me?"

"Holly said you and your brother had a falling out because of her."

"Drop it."

His eyes were cold, and surprised and hurt by the sharpness in his tone, she ran downstairs. He caught her at the bottom of the stairs, spun her around, and held her against his chest.

"I'm sorry."

"I love you, Royce. I know it's silly after knowing you for only a day, but I can't help how I feel."

He laid the palm of his hand against her cheek and stared down into her eyes. "I didn't want you to fall in love with me. I shouldn't have let that happen."

"Don't you love me? Even just a little?" she asked. When he didn't answer, she pulled away and began to search for her

swimsuit.

"Sky?"

"Forget it. I made a fool of myself. Please take me home."

"Come here."

She looked over and he was lying across the bed. "No," she said, though she yearned to have him make love to her again.

"Please."

His arms were outstretched and she sighed knowing she couldn't resist. She threw the swimsuit down and crawled into bed next to him. It felt wonderful being close to him again.

"I'm not good at saying this kind of stuff, Skyler, but from the moment I saw you in the garden, I knew I wanted you."

She sat up and stared down at him. "But are you in love with me?"

He grinned up at her. "I'm not sure I know what love is."

"What about Linda?"

"We'll take the fish over to her house tonight for dinner and you can meet her," he said.

She lay back down with her head against his chest, content to be in his arms.

"Sky? Touch me again," he said a few minutes later and his breath was hot in her ear.

She reached across his stomach and slid her hand down, and when she found the essence of his manhood, swollen and ripe again for her, she knew she would do everything in her power to please him.