

# One Love

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## Chapter 1

“Yes, Mr. Blanchard. No, Mr. Blanchard. I’m sure you do, Mr. Blanchard.”

Lanessa wedged the telephone receiver against her shoulder to free both hands as she listened. She fought to keep from groaning loudly. Sorting through the pile of papers on her desk, she searched frantically for the obscure article she’d found for another client. The second phone in her office trilled.

“Info, Inc. If we can’t find it, you don’t need it,” Robyn said in a lively voice.

Having her assistant come up with clever one liners every week as a phone greeting did not improve her mood. Lanessa wanted to find an opening to close this merry-go-round conversation with the nervous client. She had a thousand other things to do.

“I’m sure your lawyer is doing everything he can-- Yes, they do charge a fortune.” Lanessa could not help but think the man earned every penny if he had to listen to this regularly.

“Hell-ooo”, a familiar female voice called. An insistent knock on the door followed.

Robyn bounced up and opened the door. “Morning, Mrs. Pellerin. My you look lovely. But then what’s new?”

“Thank you, sweetheart.” Clarice beamed with pleasure. “And so do you. Oh, she’s on a call.” She frowned in what seemed like aggravation.

“I think she’ll be through soon.” Robyn glanced at her boss.

“Hmm.” Clarice cast a critical gaze over the office. “How are you getting along?” She raised an eyebrow.

“Great.” Robyn wore a bright smile.

“No, really.” Clarice lowered her voice. “I mean, you should have seen this place before you came. You’ve worked a miracle in one.”

“Actually Ms. Thomas just needed an extra set of hands. The files were in folders and labeled.” Robyn picked up a stack and showed them to Clarice. “See, she just couldn’t juggle assignments and organize.”

“Organization was never something Lanessa was good at.” Clarice made sure her voice carried. “But juggle men...”

Robyn cleared her throat. “Uh, come with me. I made low fat raisin bran muffins.” She beckoned for her to follow.

“You’re pure gold. Lanessa complains if she has to warm something in the microwave,” Clarice said in a stage whisper. She waved her slim fingertips at Lanessa. “I’ll be right back, dear.”

Lanessa did groan this time. “No, no, Mr. Blanchard. I’m listening.”

The man finally wound down after another five minutes of whining about the unfairness of life. Lanessa dropped the receiver on its cradle and glanced at the clock. Ten thirty, an entire

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day was ahead. She stared at the chaotic office as her mother had.

“And I wanted to be my own boss. Ha! What a laugh.”

Neither Lanessa’s voice nor attitude held even a trace of real amusement. She must have been insane to think she could handle a home-based business. It was less than two months since her last group therapy session. Somehow she felt that if she failed once more, she was doomed. Fish or cut bait, sink or swim were two phrases that had chased around her skull at least once a day. Once again she remembered why she’d anesthetized herself with liquor and pills- fear. It was her constant companion. Now she had a list of clients wanting all kinds of information. Lanessa knew she was top-notch at research. Her experience working at the legislature came in handy. She had a Rolodex full of experts on any subject, from aardvarks to zymosan. But the fear would not go away. Then the flowers sitting on top a gray metal filing cabinet caught her eye. She dug through a pile of mail to find the fancy note card. Mrs. Eddington-Carls had been effusive in her praise. Not only that, she’d sent two referrals to Lanessa.

“Bless your snobby, diamond draped soul,” Lanessa murmured. She kissed the fine linen paper with the embossed “EC” on it.

For now the little demon that tried to convince her to give up, give in and have a drink faded. The mounds of papers represented a growing business. And she was the reason those lawyers, corporate executives and more came to her. Just as her spirit rose, a staccato laugh brought it back down a notch.

“I tell you, my girls really tested me.” Clarice strolled with Robyn. She looked at Lanessa with an indulgent smile. “Hello, dear.”

“Hi, Mother. How’ve you been?” Lanessa picked up a pile of books from a chair nearby.

Clarice brushed the seat before she sat down. “Hmm, so much has happened since we last spoke. I hardly know where to begin.”

“Oh please,” Lanessa burst out. “It’s only been two weeks. I called last Thursday. Daddy said you were at your Links chapter meeting.”

“Only two weeks? And you couldn’t call back?” Clarice raised an eyebrow at her. “Robyn calls her mother once a day.”

“Only because she’s getting used to being alone after so many years of marriage.” Robyn shrugged.

“I’m so sorry, sweetie. When did your father die?” Clarice wore a look of sympathy.

“Oh daddy isn’t dead, Mrs. Pellerin. He lives in Key West with his fourth wife Tracy.”

“Excuse me?” Clarice blinked at her in confusion.

“No, mama just kicked out her third husband two months ago. This is the longest she’s gone without getting married.” Robyn giggled. “Of course I haven’t talked to her today.” With that, she went off to her small office.

“Good Lord!” Clarice turned back to Lanessa with a prim look. “You couldn’t just get a secretary with a normal background. Oh no, that would be boring.”

Lanessa threw back her head and laughed. “Mother, we’ve got more nuts in our family tree than a pecan orchard.”

“This earthy sense of humor you’ve picked up is very unattractive.” Clarice cleared her throat.

“Uh-huh.” Lanessa was amused by the way Clarice squirmed.

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"So, I take it from the ringing phone and all this that you're business is doing well." Clarice swept a hand around the office.

"Yeah. And that old saying about being careful what you wish for is so true." Lanessa heaved a sigh. "I haven't come up for air in days."

"Despite not hearing from you more often..."

"Don't start on that again," Lanessa said.

"Keeping busy can only be good for you," Clarice finished ignoring her daughter's sour look.

"You mean it'll keep me from getting drunk."

"I wouldn't have put it that way. You're sensitive like me. You need stimulation and excitement. This way you can channel your energies." Clarice gave a nod.

"And keep from climbing back into a bottle of booze or pills." Lanessa was not going to dress it up. "Mother, I'm an alcoholic. It ain't pretty, but it's the truth. Let's face it."

"I have," Clarice said a bit defensively. "I just don't need to speak so crudely about it. Honestly, I'm so glad you went to the Lanier Clinic finally. The kind of talk you picked up at that public place."

"The city clinic is one of the best in the country. And I'm not a teenager hanging with the wrong crowd." Lanessa brushed back her dark bronze hair. "Far from it."

"And that's another thing. You're in your prime. Stop acting like you're seventy-four instead of thirty-four." Clarice gazed at her. "Besides, you look a good ten years younger like most of the Hawthorne women."

"What about the Pellerin women? Daddy's sisters and Mama Pellerin still look good. I get it from both sides." Lanessa suppressed a smile at the reaction that brought.

"Handsome in their own way I suppose." Clarice lifted a shoulder. "Of course style is what really makes a nice looking woman beautiful."

"Clarice Hawthorne Pellerin, what a catty remark."

"All I'm saying is we have a certain flair and they... don't." Clarice spread her hands out to make her point.

"You're still competing with each other after all these years. Unbelievable."

"Let's get back to you, young lady." Clarice assumed a determined expression. "Who are you dating?"

"None of your business." Lanessa was equally blunt. She picked up a pile of papers. "Subject closed."

"I'm just worried about you, baby." Clarice's voice softened. She leaned forward and put a hand on Lanessa's arm. "I want you to be happy."

"And I appreciate your concern. But I'm doing okay. Besides it takes time to meet men. Remember, I'm building a whole new life with a mostly new social circle."

Lanessa refrained from commenting on the quality of the men she used to pick. In fact, some of her drinking pals was only fuzzy memories. Her tastes in male companions had left a lot to be desired. With one major exception. This time a stab of pain replaced the fear. Don't think about it. She only hoped blocking thoughts of him would eventually stop the empty ache.

"Not everyone you knew was bad." Clarice seemed to read her mind. "Alex..."

"Mother, please." Lanessa flinched at the sound of his name.

"He's divorced now." Clarice wore a look of satisfaction when Lanessa's head snapped up. "I'll bet it didn't last because he never got over you."

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Lanessa let her words sink in. She shook her head slowly. Once again she had to face reality. "That's where you're wrong. I didn't just mess up once or twice. It went back years before he finally walked away."

"But—"

"I know you're trying to help, but it's no good."

"Okay. But you're not going to be happy until you face up to it." Clarice squeezed her arm once then let go. "Well, I'd better get going."

"Thanks, mommy, for caring." Lanessa kissed her on the cheek.

"Hey, I'm a mother." Clarice patted her cheek. "Don't worry. I really am doing well. Now I've got a lots of work." She forced a smile for her mother's benefit.

"Me, too. I'm meeting with Rose Saizon about the charity luncheon next month. I swear they should have made me chairwoman. Rose can't make a move without me."

"Yes, mother." Lanessa nodded as Clarice chattered on. "Really? Imagine that. Well it will all turn out fine I'm sure."

She gently guided her out the door and toward her Lincoln Continental. When she finally said goodbye, Lanessa let out a long slow breath. At least Clarice had gotten better. A whole month had passed since she'd tried to meddle in Lanessa love life. But she was right about one thing, though not for reasons Clarice intended. Lanessa had faced a long list of people she'd hurt in the past. It was part of her healing process, of moving forward. Yet she'd rationalized that confronting Alex was different. He had a wife and children. He was a happy family man. Why open up old wounds? A reminder of his divorce knocked the legs from under that excuse.

"Hey, get over it! You've got more than enough to juggle, okay?" Lanessa threw up both hands.

"Are you talking to me, Ms. Thomas?" Robyn came in.

"No, and don't call me that. I'm only eight years older than you are. Makes me feel ancient," Lanessa muttered.

"Yes, ma'am," Robyn chirped with good humor. She darted back to answer the phone on her desk.

"And don't-- Oh never mind," Lanessa muttered.

For the next seven days Lanessa lived and breathed work. She filled up every waking hour doing research. Despite her party girl image, she had a real love of tracking down facts methodically. Lanessa soon completed one job much to her delight.

"At last!" Lanessa fell back against her chair. Sunlight slanted through the window near her desk.

"Mr. Harris is going to be very impressed." Robyn picked up the binder that contained Lanessa's final report.

"Yeah, well he oughta be. I dug up every bit of information I could find on Straecner Chemical." Lanessa rubbed her temples.

"And you'll get a bonus if he buys the company." Robyn put the report aside with five additional copies.

"We'll get a bonus," Lanessa said. "You helped me out a lot."

Robyn's eyes widened with delight and surprise. "Thanks a lot, Ms.-- I mean, thanks, Lanessa."

"You're welcome. And I'm going to subscribe to Lexis®-Nexis®. That online database will

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mean fewer trips to the library and faster results.” Lanessa stretched her stiff muscles.

“I think you could use a vacation.” Robyn arranged a set of journals that related to another assignment.

“No way. I’ve got three appointments in the next two days with new clients.” Lanessa reached for a note pad. “So I’d best get at least another job finished. Somebody came in I think. Probably the FedEx guy to pick up that package.” She nodded toward the sound of the door closing.

Robyn headed for her office that doubled as their waiting room. Lanessa turned her attention to reading a long article. She was deep into the mysteries of an obscure Latin American Indian tribe when a voice called her back to her surroundings.

“Are you ever going to come up for air?” Her best pal Jackie stood with both hands on her hips.

“Hey, girl.” Lanessa grinned at her. “Don’t tell me you’ve got a break from the salt mines. Cramer and Jacobs let you slip out on a Tuesday morning?”

“Now I know you’re spending too much time here. It’s almost noon.” Jackie pointed to the wall clock.

“Eleven fifteen is not almost noon, Jackie.”

“Honey, you’re a bit too driven even for me. C’mon, let’s go to Arzi’s for a fabulous chicken schwerma salad.”

“Can’t afford extended lunches. Too much to do. Rain check.”

“Nonsense.” Jackie slung her navy leather shoulder purse into a chair. She fit her five foot eight frame into a chair.

“Hey, I’m not on someone else’s time, babe.” Lanessa tapped the pile of magazines in front of her. “I didn’t spend the last eighteen months getting here to let it slide.”

“Lunch is all I’m talking about, not two months in Europe for goodness sakes,” Jackie said. “We haven’t had a good old gab session in weeks. Yasmin is going to meet us there.”

“I thought she was in D.C.”

“Got back last night. She’s collected all kinds of juicy news, too.” Jackie wore an impish look as she tempted Lanessa.

Jackie James and Yasmin Butler had become her closest friends in the last three years. She’d met them both at the Lanier clinic. Jackie was a top accountant who had lost custody of her son because of her drinking. Yasmin was the top aide to Senator John Trent, a young black man with a bright political future. Serious injuries from a motorcycle accident had led to dependence on painkillers. They’d leaned on each other through some rough days and rougher nights.

“Well...” Lanessa wavered. It had been a long time since they’d gotten together.

“I miss you guys,” Jackie wheedled.

Lanessa sprang from her chair. “Let’s go before I change my mind.”

After a few hasty instructions to Robyn, she and Jackie were on their way. They rode in Jackie’s olive green Nissan Maxima. The restaurant, located on one of Baton Rouge’s busiest streets, was beginning to fill up fast. They were seated at a table near the front window.

“Whew, we just beat the mad rush.” Jackie waved at the elegant woman with shoulder length brown hair. “Hey, over here!”

Yasmin strode over to the table. Looking at Jackie over her Essence designer sunglasses,

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she shook her head. "Really, Jacqueline, have you forgotten everything from charm school?"

"Dropped out," Jackie shot back with a smirk. "I'm not like you bourgeoisie gals. You can take the girl outta Easy Town but ya can't take the Easy Town outta this girl."

Yasmin chuckled. "You're so full of it. Hi, Nessa." She gave each of them a peck on the cheek then sat down.

"Hi, darlin'. You look fabulous as usual," Lanessa said.

After a few minutes of ordering and getting settled, they each had a tall glass of Lebanese iced tea. They shared a plate of three small spinach pies.

"So are you as overworked as us?" Lanessa popped a bit of pastry in her mouth.

"Girl, don't get me started." Yasmin shook her head. "And the trip was hectic. The senator had a half dozen meetings in three days."

"So much for your plan to do D.C. up big." Jackie laughed.

"You're so right. I had more meetings and then had to brief him on those." Yasmin let out a dramatic sigh. "I tell you, it was insane."

"And you love every minute of it." Lanessa nudged her arm with an elbow. "Now tell us something really good."

"Yeah, spill it. Anything on the mineral leases off Marsh Island?" Jackie sat forward.

"Did Senator Trent meet with the Department of Interior people? My client Mr. Blanchard is driving me nuts whining about his land," Lanessa joined in.

"Slow down, I thought this was supposed to be a relaxed, get-away-from-the-office lunch." Yasmin took off her sunglasses and glared her reproach at them.

"Sorry," Jackie muttered.

"She's right, Jackie. Shame," Lanessa said with crooked grin.

"Me? You..." Jackie's scowled at her.

"Shush," Lanessa cut her off smoothly. "Let Yasmin catch her breath for a few moments. Then we'll get the scoop."

"Y'all need to think about something other than work, that's your problem." Yasmin sat back and folded her arms. "And I've got the answer."

"No blind dates. Forget it," Lanessa spoke up first.

"Hey, I'm willing to at least listen. I've had two dates in the last six months." Jackie gave a shiver. "If you can call those nightmares dates."

"Didn't we decide not to do the desperate divorcees thang?" Lanessa looked at them both.

"You ladies must have men on the brain, because I wasn't talking dates," Yasmin said.

"What then?" Lanessa still wore a wary expression. "And don't leave out any important details this time."

"Yeah, like that trip down False River on a party barge." Jackie squinted at her.

"Lord, will I ever hear the end of that?" Yasmin waved her manicured fingers in the air. "Those guys were perfectly decent."

"And it's weird having your ex-husband set us up with dates, don't ya think?" Lanessa shook her head.

"Ed didn't set us up, Nessa. And—oh let's not go into that again." Yasmin brushed back her hair. "This is strictly us women."

"Hey, I didn't rule out all men," Jackie protested.

"Shush and let her finish," Lanessa said.

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"I've got a long weekend starting Thursday. The boys are with Ed's parents on the farm in Mississippi," Yasmin said.

"Don't you just love grandparents? Daren will be in Wakefield with Hilton's folks for the weekend." Jackie smiled.

"So we're free. There's a West African dance performance at the Saenger this weekend. I can get us tickets." Yasmin looked smug. "I've got connections."

"Hold on, I didn't say I'm free." Lanessa shook her head. "I've got a lot of irons in the fire."

"Work again. Don't be hardheaded. Pay attention, we're taking time off." Yasmin poked her arm with a finger.

"Ouch! Those tiger claws hurt," Lanessa said with a frown at the long red acrylic nails. "And I'm in the middle of two major projects."

"I'll bet you're ahead of schedule. Not only that, your new assistant is sharp." Yasmin fixed her with a hard stare. "Tell me I'm wrong."

"That's beside the point." Lanessa was irritated that her friend was on target. Besides, Yasmin had sent Robyn to her. "I've got meetings with potential clients."

"On the weekend?" Yasmin asked.

"Well of course not."

Jackie took a sip from her iced tea. "I'm in. The last thing I need is another weekend of watching the shopping channel."

When Lanessa still hesitated, Yasmin shrugged. "Fine. Jackie, it's you and me. We'll drive down Friday afternoon, have dinner and stay at the Le Meridian in a suite I'll reserve."

"Yeah, Saturday wandering around the riverfront and the French Quarter. Let's have lunch at Copeland's." Jackie's face lit up.

"Maybe even stay over Saturday and have dinner at Commander's Palace." Yasmin cast a sideways glance at Lanessa.

Jackie nodded with vigor. "Ooo, I like, I like!" She looked at Lanessa. "I'll have a stuffed shrimp for you, babe."

Lanessa grimaced. They both knew how much she loved shopping and dining out in New Orleans. "No fair. I won't be able to concentrate worth a darn. I'll be thinking about my two so-called best friends living it up without me."

"Then you might as well come with us." Yasmin leaned toward her.

"Yeah, Nessa." Jackie shook her arm. "Come on. One weekend won't kill your schedule."

"Fine." Lanessa held up a palm to cut off their yelps of rejoicing. "But we come back Saturday."

This was greeted with fervent protests from both women. For the rest of the lunch, they made their plans. Yasmin would pick them up in her Mercedes. They discussed what to wear and if they would call any friends while in New Orleans. Lanessa swung between changing her mind and being excited. Yasmin and Jackie kept up a steady stream of assurances that she'd made the right choice. She went back to the office feeling refreshed by the caring and wacky company of her pals.

Robyn greeted her news with a wide smile. "Good for you, Ms.—I mean, Lanessa. And don't worry. I'll have everything organized so you can pick right up Monday."

"We've got to get through the next few days first." Lanessa frowned at the thought of three new major assignments. "I was going to use the weekend to get started."

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“No problem. Just tell me the file names and I’ll work from the notes on your lap top.” Robyn handed her a set of neatly labeled folders. “You’ll have a list of possible sources to start checking.”

“You’re wonderful. Now back to Mr. Blanchard.”

Lanessa had to admit that she looked forward to the weekend. She thought of the wonderful old theater. Without warning a memory rushed back. The sound of a deep laugh and a handsome face the color of dark brown sugar made her feel flushed with heat. Alex had loved live performances. Lanessa shook her head to clear away more images that threatened to appear. After so much time, he still came back to her. Yet she was sure he did not think of her. Small wonder considering the things she’d put him through. Will you forget it? Don’t let Mother plant those ideas in your head. Lanessa knew that road was a dead end.

“Work, family and good friends. I should count my blessings,” she said in a low, firm voice.

“Pardon?” Robyn glanced at her.

“Nothing. Let’s go over the Federal Register again.” Lanessa directed all her attention to rules on wetland protection to blot out more memories.

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The rhythmic beat of drums was like a giant pulse. Women with skin the color of ebony, copper and mink swayed. Their bodies were wrapped in earth colored fabrics. Some wore beautiful head wraps. The sinuous movements seemed to hold the audience in a trance for forty-five minutes. At the last dramatic roll, the line of magnificent, statuesque performers froze in a variety of poses. Wild applause broke out as the curtain floated down. Soon all but a few in the sellout crowd were moving toward the lobby for intermission. Lanessa was entranced with the whole experience. Despite her grumblings about work during the ride down, she was happy she’d come. Under Yasmin’s bold guidance they were soon near the wet bar. She managed to charm three men into letting her order first. Their dates stood against the ornate walls a few feet away glaring.

“Uh, let’s not start something up in here, girlfriend,” Lanessa mumbled to Yasmin. She eyed the annoyed women.

Yasmin waved a hand without even looking at them. “Don’t look at them and they’ll go away.”

Jackie laughed and shook her head. “Wow, those dancers are something else.”

She accepted a glass of pink lemonade and Lanessa had Sprite. Both were in wineglasses. Yasmin smiled her thanks to one of the handsome men when he handed her a glass of diet Pepsi.

“What did I say? Didn’t I tell you they’d take your breath away?” Yasmin looped arms with Jackie and Lanessa.

“Girl, I’d be a groupie for those fine brothers any day. I mean that!” Jackie fanned herself. “Lord have mercy.”

“I’m talking about the majesty of a dance tradition that goes back centuries,” Yasmin said. She took a dainty sip of the cola.

“Uh-huh,” Jackie said.

“They’re telling stories that our ancestors listened to and told after coming to this country in chains.” Yasmin led them to spot away from the bar and those pressing forward for

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refreshments.

"How anyone could call our cousins uncivilized is beyond me," Lanessa said.

"Simple, chauvinistic stupidity," Yasmin said with her usual bluntness.

"I'd love to visit Africa one day." Lanessa nodded. "In fact we should definitely make plans to go on a tour."

"I'm there if we can find the fine brother that played the chief's son," Jackie said with a leer.

"I'm going to pour these ice cubes down your blouse to cool you off." Yasmin frowned in disapproval. "Must you make this superb cultural event into a peep show?"

"Pu-leeze, I saw you gawking at those manly brown frames." Jackie's dark eyebrows went up. "When that man with the lion costume leaped on stage, you squeaked."

"Because I was startled." Yasmin avoided her gaze. She dabbed at her neck with a paper napkin.

"Yeah right." Jackie laughed.

"Yasmin, she's got you." Lanessa joined in the laughter. "I thought you were going to climb up there, baby."

After a few seconds, Yasmin giggled wickedly. "The man's thighs are so...." She let out a low purr from the back of her throat.

Yasmin and Jackie joined in a spirited discussion about the assets of the male dancers. Lanessa let her attention wander. She scanned the well-dressed crowd enjoying herself. Souvenir items of the performance were being sold at a stand in another corner of the lobby.

"I've got to have this soundtrack," Lanessa said.

Jackie and Yasmin nodded without missing a beat in their conversation. Lanessa moved through the throng intent on her goal. She was determined not to let the compact discs sell out or miss one minute of the performance. The stack of recordings was steadily disappearing.

"Pardon me."

Lanessa pushed by a group of chattering matrons blocking her path. They looked a bit miffed at her but she kept going. Her effort was rewarded when she arrived at the counter. There were only three people ahead of her. She was glad to see there was another box of compact discs being opened. One woman wavered over which African print scarf would suit her. Lanessa looked over to see Jackie waving to her. She nodded to indicate she would soon join them. Just as she was about turn away, the broad shoulders of a man caused a catch in her throat. Could she be mistaken? Of course not. She'd recognize him anywhere, even with his back to her and at the other end of a wide room. Alexander James St. Romain stood out in any crowd. Alex was intent on something the woman beside him was saying. She was petite with shoulder length dark hair. Her black dress was a classic, simply cut with cap sleeves. When they walked toward the auditorium to return to their seats, Alex smiled down at the woman. His strong profile confirmed what she already knew. It seemed their seats were to the left and below the middle section where Lanessa sat. Lanessa's heart thumped causing her to let out a small cry. The way he'd looked at the woman was like an arrow in her chest.

"Ma'am, what can I get for you?" The cashier raised his voice. "Ma'am?"

A tall man to her right smiled. "Hard to choose. I'm having the same problem."

Lanessa could only nod. She swallowed hard and forced her gaze away from the handsome couple. "I'll—I'll take a compact disc. Make it three. And give me one of those head wraps."

She worked hard to slow her pulse. I knew this was a mistake. I never should have come.

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Lanessa paid for her purchases. For the rest of the evening she tried to blot out the familiar stunning smile. A smile that was for another woman now.

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"Aren't you glad I talked you into coming? And you were going to work late again." Karin tightened her hold on his arm.

"You were right," Alex admitted easily. "I would have kicked myself for days if I'd missed it."

"I know African dance and music are two of your passions."

"Every movement is like... magic." Alex said. "I'd seen them on television but nothing equals a live performance."

"How true. I'm glad you're enjoying yourself." Karin smiled up at him.

"Definitely. Too bad they haven't been to Baton Rouge." Alex took one last sip of California Sauvignon. He placed both their glasses on the empty tray a passing waiter held out to them.

"Oh, what a wonderful idea," Karin said with animation.

"What idea?" Alex handed her a fresh napkin.

"Thank you. Your idea about bringing them to Baton Rouge," Karin said. "My chapter could get a grant from the Arts Council."

"My idea?"

"We could sponsor groups of inner city children." Her eyes sparkled at the prospect. "They would love it."

"This wouldn't have anything to do with the rivalry, would it?"

There were two chapters of the venerable Delta Sigma Theta sorority in Baton Rouge. They competed to put on the premier social and cultural event of each season.

"Certainly not." There was no real denial in Karin's voice. Her eyes held a glint of mischief. "But a performance this magnificent would leave their art show and sale in the dust."

Alex chuckled. "Not that you'd rub their noses in it."

"Well, I can't promise." Karin laughed. "Oh, don't forget you wanted to buy a CD."

"I almost forgot." Alex looked across the lobby. "They might be out of them by now...." His voice trailed off. He blinked hard.

"Better hurry. The intermission will be over in about one minute."

It was her. Lanessa. Her hair was pulled up in a swirl. His favorite style. In a flash he remembered the feel of it, like soft dark fleece. How many times had he taken out a decorative comb and pulled his fingers through it? She'd tilt her head back to let him kiss her throat. Such a vivid image after all this time. A tall man stood near her. Alex turned his back to them.

"I'll wait until later," he said.

"They're sure to sell out by then. Come on, the line is short." Karin started off but stopped when he did not move. "Alex?"

"They're about to start. Let's go in." He guided a confused Karin toward the open door.

"All right. If you're sure." Karin looked at him with concern. "What's the matter?"

Alex pulled his lips back in what he hoped was a smile. "Nothing. I just don't want to risk missing a second of those fabulous moves. I'm sure they've got plenty of CDs since it was a sell out performance."

"Good point. I can't wait to see how it ends."

Alex nodded and tried to answer in all the right places as Karin talked on. Another part of

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his attention was on erasing the lovely face from his mind's eye. He'd heard she had her own business, that she was doing much better. What was in the glass she carried? Who was that man standing close to her? Probably another wealthy idiot buying her whatever she wanted. Alex felt hostility toward the nameless, faceless man. I must be out of my mind! Forget it. Be glad she's somebody else's headache now. It appeared Lanessa was had not changed at all. Karin's voice broke through his thoughts. Sensible, stable Karin Roan. She deserved all his attention. Karin would never take him on a wild emotional roller coaster ride.

"I'm sorry what did you say?"

"Are you sure nothing's wrong?" Karin stared at him with a slight frown.

"Positive," Alex said in a firm voice. "I'm Looking forward to dinner at our favorite place." He worked to banish sensuous memories of a troubled woman for the rest of the evening.