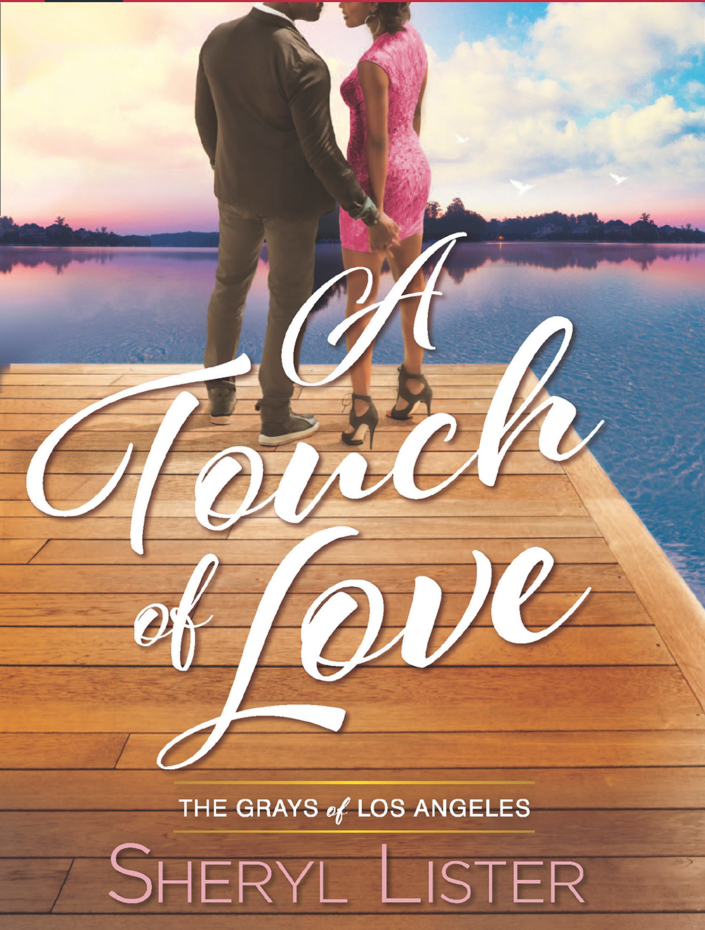


KIMANI™ ROMANCE



A Touch  
of Love

THE GRAYS *of* LOS ANGELES

SHERYL LISTER

# **Sheryl Lister**

## **A Touch Of Love**

### **Аннотация**

A passion to believe in Lexia Daniels can't deny that her café's most loyal customer is as tempting as any of the delicious treats she bakes. Burned by a bitter divorce, she tries to keep her desire in check around Khalil Gray, but the gorgeous ex-model is intent on seduction. Then a devastating accident reveals the complicated man behind the perfectly sculpted body... A man she can't seem to resist. At first, Khalil sees Lexia as a sexy challenge. But after an explosion shattered his world, she's become the only person he can't seem to push away. And every sign around him is telling him he needs her close. Khalil is happy to explore their erotic chemistry as long as it means resisting real emotion. But playing by his old rules could cost him the love he never thought he'd find...

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At first, Khalil sees Lexia as a sexy challenge. But after an explosion shatters his world, she becomes the only person he can't seem to push away. And every sign around him is telling him he needs her close. Khalil is happy to explore their erotic chemistry as long as it means resisting real emotion. But playing by his old rules could cost him the love he never thought he'd find...

She stopped at the door and sent him a text. A moment later, it swung open. She did her best to keep her eyes focused on his face and not the corded muscles of his arms and chest visible beneath the sleeveless tee. Then again, with his newly trimmed mustache and beard, long eyelashes, and golden-brown-sugar eyes, his face was just as much a visual treat as the rest of his body.

Khalil's low chuckle snapped her out of her thoughts. "Come on in."

He backed up just enough so that when she passed their bodies brushed against each other, the contact sending a jolt of awareness through her. Lexia stifled a moan. Halfway across the room, she turned around and noticed him standing with his

back braced against the door, arms folded. She angled her head. “What?” He straightened and came toward her with the grace of a panther and she unconsciously took a step back.

Khalil stroked a finger down her cheek. “I didn’t get my hello kiss.”

Before Lexia could blink, his mouth came down on hers, hot and demanding.

[Dear Reader,](#)

If you’ve kept up with the Gray siblings so far, you know that Khalil Gray is the most laid-back of the five, and I’ll admit to being surprised by some of the things he revealed to me. But his easygoing manner is going to be put to the test, as well as his claim that there isn’t a woman alive to make him give up his single status. Lexia Daniels isn’t eager to lose her heart either, but life and love don’t always play by our rules, as they’ll soon find out. I hope you enjoy their journey because I sure did!

As always, I so appreciate all your love and support. Without you, I couldn’t do this.

Much love,

Sheryl

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A Touch of Love

Sheryl Lister



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SHERYL LISTER has enjoyed reading and writing for as long as she can remember. She writes contemporary and inspirational romance and romantic suspense. She's been nominated for an Emma Award and an RT Reviewers' Choice Best Book Award, and named BRAB's 2015 Best New Author and 2016 Breakout Author and Black Pearls Magazine's 2017 Author of the Year. When she's not reading, writing or playing chauffeur, Sheryl can be found on a date with her husband or in the kitchen creating appetizers and bite-size desserts. Sheryl resides in California and is a wife, mother of three daughters and a son-in-love, and grandmother to two very special little boys. Visit her website at [www.sheryllister.com](http://www.sheryllister.com).

For DeAnna Swope, because you're amazing!

### Acknowledgments

My Heavenly Father, thank you for my life. You never cease to amaze me with Your blessings!

To my husband, Lance—you continue to show me why you'll always be my #1 hero!

To my children, family and friends—thank you for your continued support. I appreciate and love you!

A huge thank you to Thomas Swope, Jr. and DeAnna Swope

for providing me with a small glimpse of the Deaf Community. Your help was invaluable! DeAnna currently serves on the Deaf Anti-Violence Board in Georgia, is a case manager at Avita Community Partners, and was recognized as one of the 2016 Rising Stars: Black and Deaf Inspirations as a leader in the community.

To my Club N.E.O. sisters—I love you ladies!

A special thank you to the readers and authors I've met on this journey. You continue to enrich my life.

Thank you to my editor, Patience Bloom, for your editorial guidance and support.

A very special thank you to my agent, Sarah E. Younger. I appreciate you more than words can say.

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[Chapter 1](#)

“What the hell do you mean they were charged twice?” Khalil Gray stopped in his tracks. He met the disapproving glare of a grandmotherly woman and offered up a tight smile. Lowering his voice, he repeated the question.

“I have no idea,” Felicia McBride answered. The twenty-six-year-old college student worked as the assistant manager at his

fitness center, Maximum Burn. “There’ve been four calls since you left, with members saying their accounts were debited twice this month. They’ve already been corrected, but I have no idea why it happened in the first place.”

He ran an agitated hand down his face. “Thanks, Felicia. I’ll check it out when I get back.” He ended the call, still trying to figure out what was going on. He had owned the gym for five years and never had a problem before.

Khalil continued through the lobby toward the elevators and jabbed the button with more force than necessary. He toyed with stopping in Oasis Café for his favorite low fat apple cinnamon coffee cake, but because of traffic and construction across from the Wilshire District office building, he was already fifteen minutes late for the Wednesday morning staff meeting at his family’s home safety company. The elevator doors opened and he stepped back to allow the stream of people to exit before boarding and riding the car up to the sixth floor.

Khalil greeted the receptionist and walked briskly down the hallway to the large conference room. He slid into a vacant seat and turned his attention to what his older brother, Brandon, was saying. Brandon had taken over as CEO of the company nine months ago. Their father, Nolan Gray, had started the company upon his discharge from the army after being disheartened by the difficulty in getting services and accommodations for the disabled. He’d decided to do something about it by designing them himself. Their father’s best friend, Thaddeus Whitcomb

—who had lost the lower part of his leg while serving—joined the company as a minor partner and vice president. The two men had a long-standing agreement that there would always be a Gray at the helm as CEO and a Whitcomb as vice president. Currently, only Brandon and their older sister, Siobhan, worked for the company. He listened as each department gave updates.

After the last person finished, Brandon directed his attention to Khalil. “Khalil, you’re still going to be meeting with production about your equipment, right?”

Khalil nodded. “Next week. The second gym is scheduled to open in June and I don’t want any delays.” They had broken ground a year ago on the now three-level center, and the building would be completed in four weeks, barring any problems. He wanted all the equipment to be ready for installation.

“So, roughly three months until opening day. Let me know if you run into any difficulties. Is there anything else?”

Khalil glanced at the wall clock. It was almost eleven. Any hope he had of getting that coffee cake dissipated. When no one spoke, he pushed the chair from the table and started to stand.

“I have one quick thing.”

He dropped back into his seat and groaned inwardly. He loved his sister-in-law, but couldn’t she table her comments until the next meeting? Brandon had met Faith Alexander when he’d come to her rescue after a car accident. Unbeknownst to either of them, Faith was the long-lost daughter of Thaddeus Whitcomb, and rightful heir to the VP position. Uncle Thad, as

they affectionately called him, had been looking for his daughter for twenty-eight years after his wife divorced him. Khalil smiled inwardly remembering all the fireworks that followed when Brandon found out the woman he had rescued and begun dating was actually going to be his second-in-command. He hadn't been too happy since he'd grown up thinking he would head the company alone—a fact that Brandon had reiterated several times. Things had worked out between Brandon and Faith and they had married six weeks ago.

Khalil tuned back in to Faith discussing the new intern program. It gave him an idea about doing something similar at the gym. A few minutes later, the meeting ended.

“Hey, Khalil. I want to talk to you before you leave.”

He shot a glare at Brandon. Another five minutes passed before his brother made it over to where Khalil stood impatiently waiting.

“Why are you frowning at me like that?” Brandon asked.

“Because it's after eleven and my coffee cake is probably gone by now.” He strode out of the conference room, leaving Brandon to follow. “If you want to talk, we need to do it on the way downstairs.”

Brandon chuckled. “Weren't you grumbling about that three weeks ago when you were here?” He pushed the down button on the elevator.

Khalil only attended the weekly staff meeting when he had something on the agenda. “Yeah, and you'd better hope it's not

all gone again. Dad's staff meetings never ran this long. You're taking this CEO thing way too far."

"Well, we have two new products in the design phase and have to finalize plans for our interns who'll be starting soon, so there's a lot to discuss."

When the elevator arrived, they joined four other occupants and rode down to the first floor without speaking. As soon as the doors opened, Khalil hurried across the lobby to Oasis Café. The only things left in the display case in the spot where the coffee cake usually sat were the tipped-over sign and crumbs.

Behind him, Brandon laughed softly. "Guess you'll have to get here early next time."

Before he could tell his brother where to go, a tall, pretty woman approached.

"Good morning. Table for two?" She reached for menus.

"No, thank you." Khalil pointed to the glass case. "Do you have any more of the low fat apple cinnamon coffee cake?"

"Sorry. We sold the last piece about an hour ago." She chuckled. "It's our most popular item and it goes fast. We still have some other pastries you can choose from."

He frowned. He didn't want any of those sugar-laden sweets. After spending over a decade in the modeling and fitness business, he was very selective about what went into his body. The only allowances he made were family dinners. His mother could throw down in the kitchen and he looked forward to the monthly get-togethers. "Thanks, but I'll pass."

She smiled. “Is there anything else I can get you?”

“Yes, I’ll take...” Khalil trailed off when a woman wearing an apron came from the back and placed a plate on the counter. A wide headband held back her thick, wavy natural hair, and she had flawless skin, wide, dark brown eyes and lush lips, all set in an exquisite mocha face.

“I saw you this morning and knew you’d be in. You’re later than usual,” she said.

The deep, throaty sound of her voice caught him off guard and sent a jolt to his midsection. Khalil sent a scathing look over his shoulder at Brandon, then smiled, reached for her hand and brought it to his lips. “This is the best thing that has happened to me lately and I just may have to ask for your hand in marriage, lovely lady.”

Her brow lifted and she gave him a sassy smile. “Sorry, but I only accept marriage proposals from men whose name I know.”

His grin widened. “Is that right?” Was she flirting with him? She tried to pull her hand back, but he didn’t let go. “Then let me introduce myself. Khalil Gray. And you are?”

Staring at him, she said softly, “Lexia. Lexia Daniels.”

“So, Lexia Daniels, exactly how long do we need to know each other before you say yes to my proposal?”

Lexia shook her head and gently, but firmly withdrew her hand. “I need to get back to work.” She placed a cup on the counter, along with a decaf vanilla chai tea bag—his favorite. “Enjoy your coffee cake and tea.” She turned and headed back

the way she'd come.

"This should improve your mood some," Brandon said.

"Mmm-hmm." Khalil had been here several times since the café reopened under new management almost two years ago and couldn't recall ever seeing her. His gaze followed the sweet curve of her hips until she disappeared.

The other woman smiled knowingly and rang up his purchases.

He handed her some bills. "Is she the chef?"

She laughed. "No, Lexia isn't the chef, though she can cook her butt off. She owns the place." She leaned forward and said conspiratorially, "But she does make that coffee cake."

Owner? Khalil was even more intrigued. He craned his neck trying to get another glimpse of Lexia, but didn't see her. "Can you ask her to come back out for a moment? I didn't get a chance to thank her."

"You bet. By the way, my name is Samantha. But you can call me Sam." She tossed him a bold wink and strutted off.

Brandon shook his head.

"What?" Khalil asked while filling his cup with hot water. He broke off a piece of the warm cake and popped it in his mouth. Lexia must have heated it.

"I thought you were dating that model you met six months ago. How are you flirting with another woman?"

"Not dating. It's publicity."

"You said you were done with modeling and appearances."

“I am. It’s for her. Rosalyn’s agent and I go way back, and since she’s a relative newcomer, he thought it would help her career. I promised to escort her to the fund-raiser benefiting teen models in New York next month, but that’s—” He stopped short when Lexia approached. Up close, she was even shorter than he thought and he towered over her petite frame by more than a foot.

“Sam said you wanted to talk to me.”

“Yes. I just wanted to thank you for the cake. You’ve made my day much better.”

Lexia let out a short bark of laughter. “If that’s all it takes to make your day—” An embarrassed expression crossed her face and she cleared her throat. “You’re welcome. I’m glad you enjoy it.”

“I am definitely enjoying it.” And he was enjoying her. “Does this mean I can count on you to save me a slice if I’m late again?”

She averted her attention briefly to wave at a woman entering, then turned back. “I don’t know when you’ll be here.”

Khalil moved closer. “I’ll be more than happy to call and let you know.”

“That’s...that’s not necessary,” she said quickly. “Just pop in when you arrive and Sam can set aside a piece if you don’t have time to get it then.” Lexia took two steps back. “Was there anything else, Mr. Gray?”

“Khalil. And no.” For now. “Thanks, again.”

She nodded, spun around and headed toward the booth where the woman Lexia had waved to was sitting.

He removed the tea bag, added a package of raw sugar, a dash of milk and stirred. Brandon was still staring at him. “What now?” He gestured to a nearby table and they sat.

“You seem a little preoccupied with the owner.”

He grinned. “It’s nothing but a little harmless flirting. She’s not even my type. I prefer my women a little taller and ones who have legs that go on forever.”

Brandon studied Khalil for a long moment. “She may not be the type you’re used to dating, but she may end up being exactly your type.”

Khalil waved Brandon off. “Don’t get all sentimental on me now that you’ve gotten married. I told you before, there’s not a woman alive who can make me give up my single life. After all the relationship drama I’ve seen over the past decade and a half...I’ll pass.” He acknowledged that Lexia was a beautiful woman, but that was as far as it went. Never again would he allow his emotions to overrule his good sense. “What did you want to talk to me about?”

“I noticed you on your phone and frowning during the meeting. Is everything okay?”

Khalil took a sip of tea and set the cup down. Just thinking about what Felicia told him incensed him all over again. “I got a call from my assistant manager telling me a few people have complained that they had been double charged for their membership fee this month.” He continued eating.

“How did that happen?”

“Hell if I know.” He polished off the last few bites. “She’s already had the charges reversed, but I need to figure out why it happened in the first place.”

Brandon frowned. “Strange. Well, let me know if there’s something I can help with.” He stood.

Khalil followed suit. “You have enough on your plate with the company and I can handle it.”

“I have no doubts about that, but the offer stands.”

“Thanks.” He passed the table where Lexia sat with the woman. Her wide smile and sparkling eyes held him spellbound briefly and he forced himself to keep moving. Their eyes connected momentarily before she looked away and continued her conversation.

In the lobby, Brandon chuckled. “You’d better be careful, little brother or else you’ll be the next one down the aisle.”

Khalil snorted. “Please. I told you she’s not my type. See you later.” He left Brandon at the elevator and headed for the parking lot. He had been fortunate enough to grab the spot of someone leaving, which kept him from having to park in the underground garage, as he normally did. His gaze automatically shifted to the café and Lexia. No, she wasn’t his type, but she did fascinate him.

\* \* \*

Lexia Daniels tried to focus on what her best friend, Elyse Ross, was saying, but kept stealing peeks at Khalil Gray. From the way he moved and talked, to the playful glint in his light brown eyes and sexy, dark caramel body, the man was absolutely

gorgeous. A few seconds later, her gaze drifted once more to the table where Khalil sat eating and talking with the other man, who she knew worked in the building. The two men favored each other and she guessed they might be brothers. Lexia could still feel the hairs of Khalil's neatly barbered close-cropped beard and soft lips grazing the back of her hand. She unconsciously rubbed the spot, trying to erase the sensation.

Elyse waved a hand in front of Lexia's face.

She blinked.

“Are you okay?”

Lexia smiled and signed back, “I'm fine.” Elyse had lost her hearing as a result of a virus she'd contracted as a teen. Lexia and their other friend, Janice Hughes, had learned sign language to communicate more effectively with Elyse. “What are you doing here in the middle of the day? Don't you have a school to run?”

“Hey, when you're the boss...” Elyse shrugged. A sly smile curved her lips. “So, how long have you known that delicious specimen of a man? I saw the way he looked at you. And you can't seem to keep your eyes off him.”

“I don't really know him. He comes in here every few weeks or so and orders a piece of the low fat apple cinnamon coffee cake and decaf vanilla chai tea. I assume he has business here.” Lexia was usually in the back whenever he appeared and, although he couldn't see her, she never missed him. Just like always, Khalil Gray wore an expensive pair of track pants paired with an equally expensive fitted athletic shirt that showed off the lean

well-defined muscles in his upper body. Clearly, he spent hours in a gym.

“Obviously you know him well enough to remember what he orders.”

Lexia laughed. “It’s not that hard because he’s been ordering the same thing for over a year. Anyway, what’s up?”

“I was going to call you last night, but I wanted to tell you this in person.”

Her heart started pounding in alarm and her hands moved rapidly. “What happened? Is Sheldon okay? Did something—”

Elyse reached for Lexia’s hands to still them, and then smiled. “My husband is just fine and there’s nothing wrong.” She placed a hand on her belly, then placed both arms together and rocked them back and forth.

Lexia’s eyes lit up. She jumped out of the booth and rushed around to the other side. “You’re having a baby!”

She nodded. The two women shared a hug. Once Lexia went back to her seat, Elyse wiped her tears. “The only thing that would make this perfect is if Janice was here.”

She squeezed her friend’s hand and they fell silent. Janice rounded out their trio. Friends since the age of ten, they’d laughed, cried and basically done life together. Janice and her two daughters had been killed in a car accident a year and a half ago, three months after Oasis Café opened. Janice’s husband, Cameron, had been devastated when he lost his high school sweetheart.

As if she'd read Lexia's mind, Elyse asked, "Have you seen Cam lately? I've been so worried about him."

Lexia shook her head sadly. "He usually comes around every four or five weeks, but I haven't heard from him in close to two months." The tragedy had taken a toll on him and in the end Cameron had lost everything, including himself. "I'm praying he shows up soon."

She nodded. "When you see him, give him a hug from me."

"I will." Silence stretched between them again and she offered up a silent prayer for her friend.

Elyse slid out of the booth. "I'd better get back."

Lexia came to her feet. "Thanks for sharing your good news. Give my congratulations to Sheldon." She opened her mouth to say something else, but went still when she noticed Khalil through the window. Their eyes locked for a brief moment. He shot her a sexy grin and winked. Lexia's pulse skipped and the back of her hand tingled with remembrance of their earlier encounter. Irritated that he affected her this way, she jerked her gaze away.

Elyse laughed and shook her head. "Should I be offering you congratulations, as well?"

She frowned. "No."

"Whatever you say. We'll see if you're still spouting that nonsense the next time we talk."

"Nonsense is right. Been down that road before and I'd just as soon not go there again." Even after almost three years, the sting

of her divorce still left a bitter taste in her mouth. They shared another hug, said goodbye, and Lexia went back to her office to finish her supply order.

Two hours later, she left her office and found a crowded café. Sam and the part-time server Lexia had hired were rushing from table to table as the chef barked out ready orders. She intercepted Sam. “What is going on?” The café closed at three and now, with an hour to go, the diner was more crowded than the lunch rush hour.

“There’s some big meeting going on at one of the companies upstairs and this was their lunch break.” Sam continued to the table carrying an armload of plates.

Lexia donned her apron and hairnet and joined the chef in the kitchen. She cooked, filled and carried plates. At two fifty-five, the last customers exited. She and Sam collapsed into the nearest booth.

“I really appreciate all the business, but my feet and arms are about to fall off,” Sam said with a groan. “And we still have to clean up.” Because they usually only had a few stragglers after two, they were able to clean up and prep for the next day, and be gone by three thirty. Today, it would take much longer.

Lexia chuckled. “Well, take five minutes. You deserve it.”

“I’m leaving now, Lexia.”

She turned to see Jayla with her backpack slung over her shoulder. “Okay. Thanks for staying a little later. You’re not going to be late for school, are you?” Nineteen-year-old Jayla

Howard was a sophomore at UCLA, studying biochemistry. She had come up to Lexia after a food demonstration six months ago to tell her how much she had enjoyed the dish. The two spent several minutes talking and when Jayla mentioned needing a job to supplement her financial aid, Lexia had hired her to work four hours a day.

“Nope. Class doesn’t start until six, but I’m meeting my study group. I already texted to let them know I’d be a few minutes late. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Bye,” Lexia and Sam chorused.

A minute passed and Sam said, “That Khalil Gray is one fine man. I can’t believe you didn’t give him your number.”

She sighed and leaned her head against the seat. “Sam, you know what happened the last time I gave a fine man my number.”

“I do, but he might be worth another shot. I Googled him. Want to know what I found out?”

Yes! “No,” she answered, hoping she sounded disinterested.

Sam laughed. “Girl, you’re not fooling me.” She pushed to her feet and braced her hands on the table. “You know you want to know. And, ooh, the photos. Sexy!” She pulled out her phone, tapped a few buttons and fanned herself. She held the phone out to Lexia.

Lexia ignored the phone and stood. “We need to clean up so I can go home. I have some recipes to work on.” The angle of the screen let her see just enough to know he was shirtless and it took everything in her not to snatch the phone and get an up close and

personal view. “If you’re so interested, maybe you should give him your number.”

“I would, but he didn’t ask me. Besides, I’m already dating someone.” Sam glanced down at the phone again. “Mmm, mmm, mmm!”

She rolled her eyes and strode off. The temptation to see the photo was so strong, Lexia had to stop in her office and lock her phone in the drawer before returning to the front and starting on the display case. I am not interested in that man. His smiling face floated across her mind along with her body’s reaction and she groaned inwardly. The next time he came in, she planned to stay in her office, far away from temptation.

## Chapter 2

Tuesday morning, Khalil’s head came up when a knock sounded on his open office door. He stood and extended his hand. “Thanks for coming, Alonzo. And so early.” They’d been trying to schedule the meeting for over a week, and settled on seven this morning due to both their busy workloads. He gestured to the chair across from his desk.

Alonzo Wright gripped Khalil’s hand in a firm handshake, then sat. “Sorry it took me so long to get over here. Omar said you’re having some problems with your clients being overcharged?” Alonzo Wright had come highly recommended by Khalil’s pro football player brother-in-law, Omar Drummond. The private investigator had been instrumental in solving a scheme to ruin both Omar and Khalil’s sister Morgan’s

reputations orchestrated by Omar's former agent.

"No problem. I know you're busy. And, yes." He took a moment to explain the double charges. "I can't figure out for the life of me why they're happening all of a sudden. There were four last Monday when I called you and six more since then."

"Have you changed your billing system recently?"

"No. It's been the same since the day I opened the doors."

"How many people have access?"

"Three—the manager, assistant manager and me." Felicia had been with him for four years and he'd hired Logan Smith as manager a little over a year ago after his last manager relocated to another state. Khalil relayed that information to Alonzo.

Alonzo stroked his chin. "Unless someone's hacked into your system, it sounds to me like you have a virus of the two-legged variety."

He stilled. "You think it's someone who works here?" He mentally went through all five personal trainers on his staff, but dismissed them immediately. None of them would do something like this. "I haven't had any trouble with my staff, so I can't see it being one of them."

"Maybe not," Alonzo said, leaning back in the chair. "But it can't hurt to check them out. Do you mind if I look at your computer?"

Khalil stood and relinquished his chair. "By all means. Omar didn't say you were a computer whiz."

He smiled. "Just a little something I picked up along the way."

He stood off to the side while Alonzo clicked away. He rotated his head to see the wall clock. His meeting with the production manager at the home safety company wouldn't start until ten, so he had plenty of time. Today, he planned to arrive early and stop in the café. True, he wanted the cake, but he also wanted to see Lexia. Khalil hadn't been able to stop thinking about her all week and the sound of her low, throaty voice played over and over in his head. He briefly wondered what it would be like to hear her calling his name as he...

“Your system is tight, man.”

The sound of Alonzo's voice snapped Khalil out of his lustful thoughts. “That's good news, isn't it?”

Alonzo chuckled. “Yes, and no. Yes, because it means there's not some nutjob out there stealing your clients' information. No, because it could mean that—”

“That there's someone here deliberately stealing money from the members,” he finished.

“Exactly.”

Again, Khalil tried to come up with a plausible scenario of why one of his employees would do something like this. “What do you suggest?”

He tapped a finger on the desk. “I can do a couple of things. One, I can install a program on your computer that will alert you if someone goes in and debits an account outside of the scheduled dates. I noticed that you have cameras installed outside and on both floors of the gym, but none in here. Are there any in the

other offices?”

“No. It never occurred to me to put them in the offices because I don’t keep much in here and I have a lock on my file cabinet and drawers.”

“I’d like to install some, if you don’t mind. And when no one’s here.”

“I don’t mind at all. The gym doesn’t close until midnight. I’m not open on Sunday, but I don’t want to wait that long.” Unless Alonzo came before five in the morning, when the gym opened, Khalil would have no choice but to wait.

Alonzo rose to his feet. “Neither do I. The quicker we get on this, the quicker your people’s money will be safe. Let me check my schedule and work something out.”

“I appreciate your help.”

He opened the door. “I’ll give you a call later today or tomorrow.”

Khalil stood there for several seconds after Alonzo left. What the hell is going on? The intercom on his desk buzzed. He leaned over and pushed the button. “Yes.”

“Khalil, Anita Crowder is here,” the front receptionist said.

“Thanks. I’ll be right down.” Turning his mind to his client, he locked the office and went downstairs for the personal training session.

An hour and a half later, Khalil rushed back to his office to gather the drawings and reports for his meeting. His session had gone over by thirty minutes because he had to assure Anita

that she would not look like the Incredible Hulk if she did some weight lifting. The woman had complained the entire session. Not until he showed her photos of other female clients he'd worked with, did she relax.

He still had an hour to get to his meeting and the drive from Fox Hills to the Wilshire District would take less than half an hour without traffic. However, with the sheer number of cars on the LA roads, that time could double. And he wanted to have plenty of time to stop in the café. He smiled. Yep, he was looking forward to seeing Lexia again.

As he'd predicted, the traffic was heavy and he made it with three minutes to spare. Khalil really hoped they'd complete whatever roadwork was being done near the building soon. It took ten minutes just to get into the parking garage. He was a stickler for time, so Lexia would have to wait.

\* \* \*

Tuesday morning, Lexia yawned as she gently folded in chopped apples to her coffee cake batter and poured half into the prepared pan. She added crumb topping, the rest of the batter, a final layer of topping then put it, along with a second pan, into the oven. She told herself she hadn't made the additional pan just in case Khalil showed up, but it was a lie. She'd also promised herself she wasn't going to succumb to the urge to look him up on the internet and she had held up well over the past week. But curiosity got the best of her and, after washing her hands at the large double sink and drying them on a paper towel, she pulled

out her cell and typed in his name.

Lexia expected a couple hundred hits but was stunned to see close to half a million. She clicked on the photo gallery and saw him in everything from shorts, T-shirt and running shoes to a tuxedo. However, the picture that had her attention was one taken a few years ago of him braced in a doorway, wearing nothing but a pair of black boxer briefs. Her gaze roamed over every perfect inch of his body, from the closely cut hair and goatee, to the slender well-defined muscles of his chest, arms, abs and thighs. He'd let the low beard grow in fully and she didn't know which look she liked better. "How on earth does he keep his body looking like this?" she murmured.

"I knew you'd be checking him out sooner or later."

She jumped and spun around. "Sam, you scared the crap out of me!" She drew in a calming breath. "Girl, you can't just sneak up on me like that. I could've hurt you."

Sam lifted a brow. "You didn't have anything in your hands except that phone and, with that fine brother on the screen I knew you weren't going to risk throwing it." She leaned closer to see the photo. "Mmm-hmm, I saw that one, too. He was a model."

Lexia stared at the photo. She could certainly believe that and it explained the upright posture and smooth, sexy walk. She glanced up to see Sam smiling, exited out of the page and shoved the phone back into her pocket.

"Oh don't put it away on my account. I could look at him all day. And that voice." Sam sighed dramatically.

So could she, but that's how she got caught up the last time. She didn't need another silver-tongued devil in her life. "Wait. Shouldn't you be saving all your staring for your boyfriend?"

"I'm not planning to touch. Just look and admire," she said with a grin.

"Well, you'll have to look at him on your break. We have work to do."

"Whatever you say, boss. I do think you ought to talk to him, though. It's time for you to jump on the horse again."

Lexia ignored the smirk on her friend's face. Sam had witnessed firsthand what Lexia went through with her divorce and knew Lexia had sworn off men indefinitely.

By the time they placed the muffins and other pastries that the chef, James Willis, had made into the display case and brewed coffee, the coffee cake was done. After letting it cool for fifteen minutes, Lexia sliced it and added it to the case just as the six-thirty opening time rolled around. They had a steady stream of customers for the first couple of hours. Many people sat to eat while reading the paper or working on tablets. As soon as the rush hour died down, she retreated to her office.

An hour later, Sam stuck her head in the door. "Guess who's here, Lexi?"

By the smile on her friend's face, Lexia figured it had to be Khalil. "And? Just give him the plate you insisted we set aside just in case."

"I would, but he specifically asked to see you."

She lowered her head to the desk and groaned.

Sam laughed. “Hey, at least he looks good and has it going on. It could be worse.”

She glared. “You’re not helping, Samantha.”

“Uh-oh, she called me by my whole name. Must be serious. And I am helping. No need to let your best years pass you by because of one idiot.” She folded her arms and leaned against the door frame. “I still wish you had let me kick Desmond’s butt.”

Lexia smiled. Sam had been with her when she caught Desmond Martin and one of the waitresses who worked at the diner they owned having sex in the office. He hadn’t shown one ounce of remorse and made it his mission to hurt Lexia by taking away the diner when she wouldn’t “forget about it,” as he’d said. Samantha, with her five-ten height, had been ready to dismember him. If Lexia thought they could get away with it, she might have. Now there was Khalil Gray. She pushed to her feet.

Sam straightened and pointed a finger Lexia’s way. “And be nice.”

Lexia rolled her eyes. “I’m always nice.”

She burst out laughing. “Tell that to the last four guys that you sliced and diced so sweetly they’re still trying to figure out what happened.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she lied. Since her divorce, she’d immediately shut down any man who had shown the least bit of interest in her—delete and block. Why she hadn’t done the same thing to Khalil was a mystery. Lexia sighed

heavily. “Let me go see what he wants.” She walked past Sam and started toward the front.

Sam stopped her. “Ah, you might want to take this.” She held out the plate.

She ignored Sam’s knowing smirk, snatched the plate covered in plastic wrap and strode off. Khalil was standing with his back to her and talking on his cell when she approached and Lexia took a moment to study his slim build. He stood over six feet and gave new meaning to fine and sexy. If she had to guess by his attire, she would say he was some kind of fitness buff. Once again, he wore a pair of athletic pants, which accentuated a firm muscular butt that made her want to find out if it was as hard as it looked. She chastised herself for the errant thought and promptly shoved it aside. As if sensing her presence, he turned and smiled. Her pulse skipped. Heart-stopping was the only way to describe it. And those eyes. If she had any sense, she’d drop the plate on a table and get as far away from this man as fast as possible.

“I’ll call you back,” she heard him say. He stuck the phone in his pocket. “How are you, Lexia?”

“Fine.” She handed him the plate. “S—”

“Lexi figured you’d be in and saved you an extra-large piece,” Sam said as she breezed by carrying full plates, earning a scowl from Lexia.

Lexia wanted to strangle Sam. Sam knew good and well she had cut that piece herself.

Khalil’s smile widened. “Thanks for looking out for me. How

did you know I'd be here today?"

"I didn't." No way would she tell him she'd spotted him earlier as he rushed toward the elevator. "Well, enjoy your food."

"Aren't you going to join me?"

"I hadn't planned to. I have a lot of work to do."

He cupped her elbow and steered her toward a booth at the far end. "I'm sure Sam won't mind if you keep me company for a few minutes. After all you are the boss."

The warmth of his touch ignited a fluttering sensation in her stomach. To keep from melting in a puddle, Lexia quickly slid into the booth.

Khalil set the plate down. "I'll be right back."

She watched his sexy swagger as he headed back to the counter and knew, instinctively, that he'd gone back for tea. That walk should be outlawed! She could just imagine him strutting down a runway. She frowned when he came toward her with two cups.

"Chamomile with honey and lemon for you and, of course, decaf vanilla chai for me." He took a seat across from her and pushed the cup her way.

Lexia sent a lethal glare Sam's way. The traitor. "Thanks," she murmured.

"So how long have you been a chef?" he asked, starting in on his food.

"Eight years, but I've been cooking since I was a teen." She had fond memories of Mr. Wall letting her help in the kitchen

of his small diner. Just as quickly, another thought stirred up the anger and hurt she had worked so hard to forget. Not wanting to dwell on the unpleasantness, she took a sip of her tea and changed the subject. “What about you? Do you work here in the building?”

Khalil finished chewing. “Lately, it’s starting to feel like I work here, but no, I don’t. Our family-owned home safety company is located on the sixth floor and I attend some of the meetings. I’m actually in fitness.”

“I figured it was something like that by the way you’re always dressed. Are you some kind of personal trainer?”

“Yes, among other things.” He leaned forward and locked his gaze with hers. “Are you looking for some personal training?”

A vision of his hands on her demonstrating some exercise technique flashed in her mind. Lexia choked on her tea. She hastily set the cup down with a thud.

“Are you okay?”

When he started to stand, she held up a hand. “I’m fine,” she croaked. “It just went down the wrong pipe.” She cleared her throat, took a careful sip and swallowed without incident. “See. Fine.”

Khalil studied Lexia for a moment, and then nodded. They fell silent. “You didn’t answer my question.”

She had hoped he’d forgotten. “No. Although I probably should work out more consistently, my schedule doesn’t allow for a gym membership right now. Where do you work?”

“Maximum Burn in Fox Hills.”

Great. Less than ten minutes from my condo. “I’ve heard of it.”

“Anytime you want to come by, let me know.”

“Um...I heard it’s pretty pricey.”

He waved her off. “We offer plans to fit every budget. I don’t want money to be an obstacle for anyone looking to maintain or start a healthy lifestyle. But you don’t have to be concerned about money. For you, the cost is free.”

Lexia narrowed her eyes. “What’s the catch?”

Khalil laughed. “No catch. Well, maybe a small one.”

“I knew it.”

He reached for her hand. “A date. Next Tuesday morning, you and me, right here in this booth, ten thirty.”

She should have known better than to ask. From the moment they had met, he’d made his interest clear. “I don’t—”

“It’s a win-win for both of us. I get to spend more time with a beautiful lady and you get three free personal training sessions. And before you say you don’t have time to go to the gym, I’ll design a program for you that can easily be done at home with just a few simple and inexpensive pieces of equipment. So what do you say?”

He unleashed that mesmerizing smile on her and Lexia heard herself agreeing.

“Great. It’s a date. You can let me know next time what your fitness goals are and when you’d like to start your sessions.”

She made a move to stand and he was up and around to her side with his hand extended in a flash. She tentatively placed her hand in his and he helped her to her feet. “Thanks.”

Once again, he brought her hand to his lips. “Until next week, Lexia.” He smiled, winked and strolled out.

What in the world have I gotten myself into?

### Chapter 3

Monday evening, Lexia leaned against the kitchen counter trying to decide which recipe to use for the cooking demonstration next month. With summer fast approaching, people would most likely be looking for something a little healthier. Her mind automatically shifted to Khalil and his personal training offer. If her body reacted just from him simply holding her hand, no way could she handle a session with him standing so close, his hands roaming over her arms, sliding down her torso and hips, around to her... She abruptly halted her lustful thoughts. “Get a grip, girl,” she muttered. “Recipes...that’s all you’re supposed to be thinking about.” She flipped through the cards and lingered over one featuring shrimp tacos with a creamy cilantro sauce. This could work.

She searched through the cabinets and refrigerator and found all the ingredients. Lexia made a practice of shopping every week and kept her kitchen well stocked. Since it was relatively early, she decided to make homemade corn tortillas instead of using the store-bought ones. She defrosted the shrimp, removed the tails and seasoned them with a rub made from seasoned salt, pepper,

cumin, paprika and chili powder, then skewered them. Next, she went to work on the cilantro sauce. Just as she finished, her phone rang. She quickly washed and dried her hands and ran to catch it. Seeing Samantha's name on the display, she said, "What's up, girlfriend?"

"Hey, girl," Samantha said. "Aaron has to work late tonight and I was wondering if you wanted to grab a bite to eat."

Lexia smiled. "Oh, so now you have time for me," she teased. Since Samantha and Aaron started dating four months ago, Lexia and Sam rarely hung out during the week.

"Whatever. We'll see if you have time once you and Mr. Gray start hanging out."

"Yeah, right. We won't be hanging out. The man has playboy written all over him. You saw him. Besides, I'm sure he has tons of women running after him already. Remember he was a model." Against her better judgment, she'd read more about him and found out that he had modeled all over the United States and in several other countries. There had been thousands of photos of him with an array of beautiful women, and in some of the shots, they seemed quite cozy.

"Mmm-hmm, I saw him, all right. Saw that he only had eyes for you."

"You were asking about dinner."

Sam laughed. "You can change the subject, but you can't change Khalil Gray's blatant attraction to you. Now, regarding dinner, I can pick something up and bring it over or we can meet

up somewhere.”

“Actually, I’m experimenting with a recipe, shrimp tacos with a cilantro cream sauce on homemade corn tortillas.”

“Say no more. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

Lexia heard a beep. “Sam?” She pulled the cell away from her ear and glanced down at the display. Sam had hung up. She chuckled, shook her head and continued preparing dinner.

Twenty minutes later, she opened the door to Sam.

Sam held up a bag. “I stopped and got our favorite Moscato.”

“In that case, come on in.” They both laughed.

She followed Lexia to the kitchen. “Do you need me to do anything?”

“If you can grill the shrimp while I make the tortillas, that would be great.”

“Sure.” Sam washed her hands, then carried the plate with the shrimp skewers to the stove. She laid them on the preheated built-in grill. “Mmm, this smells so good. What spices did you use?”

Lexia rattled off the list while pressing the tortillas. When she finished, she heated the comal and added the tortillas, one at a time. Once everything was done, Lexia added some of the sauce to the shredded cabbage and mixed it in. “All right, let’s try this.” They fixed their plates, filled glasses of wine and sat at the kitchen table.

Sam rubbed her hands together. “I’m starving.” She bit into a taco, chewed and groaned. “Oh my goodness, Lexi, this is absolutely divine. And this sauce.” She spooned more onto her

half-eaten taco. "It's so light, like a summer day. What's in it?"

"That's what I was going for. It's light sour cream, cilantro, lime and a dash of salt. I'm planning to do this for the cooking demonstration at the food festival next month." She was pleased by the outcome and agreed that the light dish would be perfect for summer.

"Girl, I hope you're planning to make at least a hundred of these because folks are going to be lined up for miles to get one. This would be a great recipe to add to the menu at the café."

"Maybe." She had been thinking about adding a few calorie-conscious items to the menu, especially since the low fat coffee cake seemed to be such a hit. One woman had called it guilt-free indulgence. "What do you think of adding three or four healthy dishes so people have options?"

"With the fitness craze going on, I think it's a great idea." Sam sipped her wine and added slyly, "I'm sure Khalil would appreciate it. Who knows, he might start coming in for breakfast and lunch."

Lexia took a big gulp of wine. As much as she tried to deny it, the prospect of seeing Khalil sent a thrill through her. What would he think of the tacos?

"See, you're over there thinking about him."

Busted, she picked up a stray shrimp and popped it in her mouth. "No, I'm not," she lied. "I was thinking about what other dishes would work well." The smile on Sam's face said she knew better, but she didn't comment.

“Are you ready for your date tomorrow?”

“It’s not really a date.”

“That’s not what he told me on his way out last week when he asked me to make sure to set aside two pieces of that coffee cake. You might want to redo your twist out and wear something cute.”

Lexia groaned and rose from the table with her plate. “He’s coming to my job, so he’ll have to settle for my work clothes. If he wants anything else, he might want to find one of those models he’s used to.”

Yet, hours after Sam left, Lexia found herself searching through her wardrobe for something other than her normal khakis and pullover knit top.

By the time she made it in to work the next morning, Lexia was in a foul mood. She’d spent a restless night dreaming about a man she had no business even thinking about. Her life was simple and uncomplicated and she wanted it to stay that way. She decided that today’s “date” would be the last one, no matter how much Khalil affected her.

“Lexia, there’s a guy outside asking for you,” Jayla said, poking her head in the office.

Her gaze flew to the clock on the wall. He was twenty minutes early. Sighing inwardly, she came to her feet. “Thanks, Jayla. I’ll be out in a moment.”

“Okay.” She disappeared.

Lexia drew in a calming breath, rehearsed her I-can’t-see-you-again speech in her head and went out front. A relieved smile lit

her face at the sight of Cameron standing outside the café. She stopped to give a meal order to Mr. Willis, then pushed through the doors. “Cam, I’m so glad to see you.”

“Hey, Lexi.” She could hear the sadness and fatigue in his voice.

“You want to come in and eat?”

Cameron shook his head. “Too dirty.”

She scanned him from head to toe. His hair was matted and littered with pieces of lint, the shirt and jeans looked like the same ones he’d had on when she saw him last and she suspected he hadn’t bathed since then, either. But beneath the dirt and grime was a good-looking man with a heart of gold. “How about we go sit on the bench outside and talk. I’ll bring you some breakfast.”

He nodded and shuffled out the glass doors leading to the back parking lot.

Lexia waited to make sure he was seated before going to get his food. She had to figure out a way to help him. A few minutes later, she joined him on the bench and handed him the to-go carton filled with scrambled eggs, potatoes with onions and peppers, bacon, sausage, two biscuits and a large cup of orange juice. He dived in like a starved man and her heart constricted. “How’ve you been? I was worried when you didn’t come by last month.”

Cameron shrugged and continued eating. When he finished and set the carton aside, he sighed heavily. “Thanks, Lexi.” He

stared out at a spot in the sky. “Jan is probably cussing me out from heaven over the mess I’ve made of my life.”

Lexia laughed softly. “No doubt she is. But she’d also understand. Just like she was your world, you were hers.” She handed him the framed photograph he had asked her to keep.

He ran his hands lovingly over the faces of Janice and their two daughters, five-year-old Lauren and one-year-old Sienna. “I miss them so much.” His voice cracked.

She felt her own emotions rising and covered his hand with hers. “I know. So do I. But Jan would want you to go on.”

He swiped at the tears coursing down his cheeks. “You’re right and I’ve been thinking on it.”

It was the first time in over a year he had mentioned trying to reintegrate into society on his own. Every time Lexia had brought it up in the past, he’d change the subject or leave. “If there’s anything you need me to do, anything, just ask. Like I told you before, you’re welcome to stay in the back room of the café until you get on your feet.” She had added a bed months ago, hoping he would take her up on the offer.

He stared off again. “Let me think about it, okay?”

“Sure. You want to take a shower? I still have the clothes you asked me to keep.”

Cameron looked down at himself. “I guess I don’t smell too good.”

She chuckled. “That’s an understatement.”

For the first time in almost two years, a slight smile appeared

on his face. "I can always depend on you to tell me the truth."

"Always." They stood and she embraced him. When she stepped back, her gaze locked with Khalil's. He stood inside with his arms folded and a glare on his face. She glared right back.

"Friend of yours?" Cameron asked.

"Um...not really. He's just someone who frequents the café." She glanced over her shoulder. Khalil hadn't moved from the spot and his expression remained the same. Here we go.

\* \* \*

Khalil finished his meeting early and had hoped to spend the extra time with Lexia, but stopped short upon seeing her outside with a large, unkempt man. His protective nature kicked into high gear. He stood there watching for a good five minutes and, when she saw him, she sent a hostile look his way. She could glare all she wanted to, but he wasn't moving until she came back inside. The man disappeared around the back of the building and Lexia entered through the glass doors and came toward him.

"You should be careful of the company you keep," Khalil said when she reached him.

"The company I keep is just fine." Lexia eyed him. "Present company excluded."

His brow lifted. "No need to get all upset. I'm just concerned about your safety. He could've been dangerous." The huge man could have easily overpowered her.

She placed a hand on her hip and scowled up at him. "Are you always so arrogant and judgmental?"

He angled his head thoughtfully. He really had upset her. A small knot of people viewed their exchange curiously. Not wanting to draw any more attention, he gently steered her toward the café.

She snatched her arm away. “What are you doing?”

Khalil grasped her hand. “People are staring. Let’s go sit inside and you can tell me all about my arrogant and judgmental self.” He escorted her over to the same booth they’d sat in previously.

Lexia sat across from him with her lips tightly pursed.

Having her angry with him didn’t sit well. “I don’t consider myself to be arrogant and judgmental, and I apologize for upsetting you. Like I said, I was only concerned about your safety.”

Some of the anger drained from her face. “I wasn’t in any danger. He’s a friend.”

“What happened to him?”

“He lost his wife and children in a car accident about a year and a half ago.”

“Damn,” he whispered.

“Right. So, before you go forming an opinion about someone, you should get all the facts first.”

Khalil heard the censure in her voice. He had never been one to pass judgment on someone without even hearing his or her side and wondered why he had been so quick to jump to conclusions this time. “You’re right.” Her surprised expression prompted him to ask, “What? I don’t have a problem admitting

when I'm wrong.”

Lexia studied him a moment, as if searching for the truth. “I’m glad to hear it.”

He smiled. “So, can we start our date now?”

She shook her head and chuckled. “You don’t let up for a moment, do you?”

“And risk some other guy snatching you up first? Nah.” He winked and signaled the hostess. Lexia rolled her eyes and he laughed.

While eating a few minutes later, Lexia said, “I thought you didn’t come here often.”

“I usually don’t, but I’m designing some specialized equipment for the gym and having it made and produced by my family’s company.”

She frowned and broke off a small piece of coffee cake. “How does that fit with home safety?”

Khalil smiled. “Since I started designing the equipment three years ago, they added a small extension to the company.” When a few of his personal clients mentioned the difficulties they had using some of the machines, he transformed a section of the gym to accommodate those who were in wheelchairs, had limbs amputated or other disabilities. The new equipment would have braille and he had just installed a section of flooring that had the same feel as a mat, but without the uneven surface for those with low vision or blindness. As he had told Lexia, he didn’t want any barriers for people wanting to work out.

“Wait. Do you own the gym?”

“Yep.” He sipped his tea.

“Was that before or after mod—?” Lexia stopped midsentence and picked up her cup.

Khalil placed his cup on the table and observed her. If she knew about the modeling, she had obviously looked him up. “After.”

“I...um...I wasn’t stalking you or anything.”

“Actually, I’m flattered.”

“How did you get into modeling?”

“A couple of my high school friends dared me to enter one of those model search contests.” He shrugged. “I won, so...”

She laughed. “I bet they were shocked. I guess it worked out for you by all the photos—”

“I’m glad to know you were thinking about me because I definitely thought about you.” He reached for her hand. “All week long.” He couldn’t remember the last time a woman had invaded his dreams, but this petite fireball had not only entered them, but also consumed every corner of his mind each night.

Lexia withdrew her hand. “Khalil, I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Why not? Are you saying you don’t like my company?” he asked, referencing her earlier comment.

She slanted him a look. “Your company is fine...for now. But...”

Khalil’s cell rang and interrupted whatever he planned to say.

He pulled out the phone to check the display and cursed under his breath. It was his assistant manager. “Can you excuse me a minute, Lexia? I have to take this. I won’t be long.”

“Sure.”

He slid out of the booth and answered while heading out to the lobby. “Hey, Felicia.”

“Hi, Khalil. You asked me to call if I noticed anything regarding the charges and I thought you’d like to know that I saw Logan going into your office. I asked what he was doing and he said you asked him to check something on the computer.”

He shoved the front doors open and stepped out onto the sidewalk. “Logan knows damn well I never told him to enter my office,” he said through clenched teeth. He mentally retraced his morning. Had he been so anxious to leave that he forgot to lock the door? He always kept it secure when he wasn’t there.

“I thought the same. That’s why I called.”

“Is he still there?” With the noise coming from traffic and the road construction, he stuck a finger in his ear to hear her better.

“No. He went to lunch. He didn’t get a chance to log on to your computer because I busted him as soon as he went in. After he walked out, I locked your door.”

Khalil paced in front of the building. Thank goodness Alonzo had come in to install the cameras last week. Khalil would be able to see exactly what Logan had been up to. “Thanks, Felicia. I’ll check it out when—” A loud explosion sounded and before he could turn around, he was pitched backward and airborne.

Khalil came to lying on the ground. Every inch of his body hurt, he had difficulty breathing and there was a loud ringing in his ears. He tried to get up, but the pain forced him back down. He moaned. He could see glass and debris everywhere and people scrambling for cover. He closed his eyes as another wave of pain hit.

“Khalil! Are you okay?”

He felt someone touch him and looked up to find Lexia on her knees next to him.

She palmed his face. “Where are you hurt?”

His eyes widened, his heart raced and his chest tightened. Her mouth was moving, but he heard not one sound. He lifted his head and scanned the area—flashing lights from police vehicles, people still running, cars, but he didn’t hear anything. “I can’t hear you,” he said, panicking. He grabbed her hand. “I can’t hear you,” he said again. But he didn’t even hear his own voice.

## Chapter 4

Lexia scanned her surroundings. Thick smoke filled the air, a large hole sat in the center of the street and nearby buildings were damaged, including the one housing her café. Her front window had been shattered, as well as several other ones in the building. She saw a few injured people being tended to and wondered if anyone had been killed. Since it was midmorning, most people were working. Had it been an hour later, things would have been much worse. She turned her attention to Khalil, who lay with his eyes closed. Lexia toyed with trying to get him up and inside, but

every movement seemed to increase his pain and she didn't want to cause him further injury.

Khalil opened his eyes. "Lexia, I can't hear anything."

Although he tried to hide it, Lexia saw it for a split second. Fear. She assumed the blast had damaged his hearing and prayed it was temporary. She sensed his fear rising and placed her hand gently on his chest. She used the other one to turn his face toward her and mouthed, "You're going to be okay." He placed his hand over hers on his chest and she leaned down and placed a soft kiss on his lips. Khalil stared up at her with a strange look on his face and, belatedly, she realized what she had done. Before she could analyze it, people began streaming from the building and she caught the gaze of his brother. Lexia waved at him.

His eyes widened when he noticed Khalil and he pushed through the crowd. He dropped to his knees in his expensively tailored slacks, concern evident in his face. "Khalil, are you okay? Where are you hurt?"

Lexia laid a hand on his arm. "He can't hear you."

He whipped his head around. "What do you mean he can't hear me?"

"The blast. I think it damaged his hearing. He told me he couldn't hear anything."

He cursed and whipped out his cell phone. He snapped at a 911 operator who, apparently, wasn't responding to his satisfaction. "Well, how long is it going to take? My brother is lying in the street injured."

Lexia understood where he was coming from. She felt just as helpless. Finally, four fire trucks and a number of paramedics descended on the scene. “They’re here.”

He glanced up, mumbled something that sounded like a thank-you and disconnected the call. “I’ll be right back.” He stood.

“Brandon.” Khalil tried to sit up and moaned again.

Brandon stopped and placed a hand on Khalil’s shoulder. “Whoa. Don’t try to get up.” He turned to Lexia. “Make sure he doesn’t move.”

She nodded.

Khalil rolled his head in her direction. “Brandon is bossy as hell,” he whispered. “I don’t have to hear to know what’s he’s about to do. Don’t let him piss off the paramedics. Otherwise, they’ll leave me lying on this sidewalk all damn day.”

Lexia smiled and nodded. She glanced up in time to see Brandon pointing in their direction and standing over the paramedic, with a heavy scowl—just as Khalil predicted—until the man followed. She and Brandon moved off to the side while the medic assessed Khalil.

A moment later, another medic joined them with a gurney. The first one spoke to Brandon. “By his shallow breathing and pain when I barely press on the area, I’d say he has a couple of broken ribs.”

“And he can’t hear,” Lexia added.

“Thanks,” the medic said. “I’ll make sure to let them know at the hospital.” He nodded to the other paramedic and they

carefully transferred Khalil to the gurney.

Brandon stepped forward. "I'm coming with him."

His tone and the look on his face let Lexia know he wouldn't take no for an answer. Apparently the paramedic realized it, as well, and nodded.

"Are you coming?"

She glanced over at Khalil then up at Brandon. As much as she wanted to go, Lexia didn't think it was her place. "No. But can you please let me know how he's doing?"

"I will. Thanks for being here with him." He laid a gentle hand on her shoulder, then left.

She wrapped her arms around her middle and watched as they loaded Khalil into the ambulance and drove off.

"Is he going to be okay?"

Lexia turned at the sound of Sam's voice. "I think so. But the blast damaged his ears. He can't hear."

Sam brought her hand to her mouth. "Oh no."

She recalled the split second of vulnerability she'd seen and her emotions swelled once more.

"Come on, Lexi. I'm sure he'll be okay."

Lexia took one last glance around and nodded. On the way, she spied Khalil's phone. She had no problems recognizing it because of the distinctive custom case featuring his gym's logo. She picked it up and brushed off the debris. Other than a few cracks on the face, the phone seemed to be intact. Inside, she froze upon seeing Cameron sweeping up glass from the shattered

window. Tears welled in her eyes. This was the man she knew—clean shaven, low-cut hair and neatly groomed appearance. He had on a pair of black khakis and a gray polo shirt.

Cameron paused with the broom. “You good, Lexi?”

“Yeah. You clean up nicely.”

He grinned. “I knew you were going to say that.” He shook his head and resumed the task, along with James, who had come out of the kitchen to help with the cleanup.

Jayla held up her phone. “It says it was a natural gas explosion. Two workers were killed and several others injured.” She looked down at the screen and read for a moment, then added, “This one is considered mild and could have been much worse.”

Lexia grabbed a towel and a trash bag and joined Samantha in clearing glass off the tables. She sighed. Mild or not, it would take a lot of work to repair the businesses damaged, including her own. Her heart went out to the families of the two workers and the rest of the people who had been injured. Automatically, her thoughts shifted to Khalil and how he was doing. It dawned on her that she hadn’t given Brandon her number and would most likely have to wait until he came to work tomorrow to find out any information. If he came in. She should have gone to the hospital.

\* \* \*

Khalil slowly came awake, glanced around the room and saw his entire family. It took a moment before everything came rushing back and he realized he was lying in a hospital bed. He moved and pain shot through his midsection. He must have made

a sound because his mother crossed the room in two strides and ran her hands critically over his face. His head throbbed, the loud ringing in his ears hadn't stopped, his chest felt like someone was standing on it every time he breathed deeply—and he still couldn't hear a sound. Khalil scanned their concerned faces. "I'm all right, Mom." He frowned and gently pushed her hand away from the bandage on his temple. He saw all their mouths moving and an overwhelming sense of frustration surged inside him. Brandon raised his hand and got their attention and said something. Brandon obviously told them about Khalil's hearing loss because all eyes turned Khalil's way and his mother and two sisters, Siobhan and Morgan, started crying and rushed over to the bed. Even Faith had tears in her eyes. His father looked stricken.

Khalil leaned back against the pillows and closed his eyes. This is all I need right now. He couldn't stand to see them cry and bit back the urge to tell them all to leave. He sent his brothers and brothers-in-law a pleading glance. They gathered their wives, and together with his parents exited, leaving only his younger brother, Malcolm.

Malcolm pulled a chair close to the bed and sat. For the first few minutes, the pro football running back said nothing as if he knew Khalil needed a moment.

"I never could stand to see them cry."

Malcolm took out his phone, typed something and handed it to Khalil.

He read: “Neither can I. What do you need me to do? Oh, and you should probably lower your voice.” Because he couldn’t hear himself, Khalil had no idea how to modulate his voice. “Is this better?” he asked in what he hoped was a softer sound.

He nodded.

“Did the doctor say how long I’d be like this?”

Malcolm took the phone, typed again and handed it back.

“Brandon said the doctor told him your eardrums were ruptured from the blast and the hearing loss could last a few days, months or, depending on the damage, longer. He mentioned referring you to a specialist.”

Khalil dropped the phone on his lap and cursed. What if his hearing didn’t come back? He couldn’t be deaf forever. The thought of never hearing his favorite song on the radio, the waves crashing against the shore while standing on his balcony or the laughter around the table at his family’s monthly dinners made the same panic he’d felt while lying on the sidewalk come back full force. He passed the phone back to his brother, who began typing again. Was there more? He knew about the broken ribs, slight concussion and sprained wrist, thanks to a nurse who had written the information down for him while in emergency. Khalil couldn’t imagine what else could be wrong and wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

Malcolm stood and held the phone close enough for Khalil to read.

The gym. He had totally forgotten about it. “Yeah, I do need

you to go over. I've been having some problems with some of the members being double charged." Like Khalil, Malcolm had a degree in kinesiology and the two had discussed the possibility of him joining Khalil in the business once he retired from football. He filled Malcolm in on the meeting with Alonzo and his latest phone call with Felicia. "Can you call Alonzo and have him download the images on the camera and check my computer?" Another thought occurred to him. He'd been in the middle of the call with his assistant manager and she probably had no idea what had happened. He didn't even know what happened to his phone. "Ask Felicia to cancel all my clients and tell her not to come up here. I'm fine." Not exactly the truth, but he didn't want another person staring at him with a look of pity. His family had done enough of that. "I'll contact her in a few days. Oh, and my phone is gone."

He nodded, typed something else and held up the phone. "Don't worry about your phone right now. We'll get you one when you get home."

Before Khalil could respond, a middle-aged man wearing scrubs and a white jacket, a doctor he assumed, entered carrying what looked like two cell phones.

Malcolm touched Khalil on his uninjured shoulder, pointed toward the door and mouthed, "I'm leaving."

After his brother left, the doctor pressed a few buttons on the gadgets, then handed one to Khalil. Khalil had been correct about it being a cell phone. He glanced up to see the doctor

talking and started to get frustrated until the man pointed at the phone in Khalil's hand. He shifted his gaze and saw the words automatically being typed on the screen as the doctor talked.

The man introduced himself as Dr. Moyer, the ear, nose and throat specialist and asked several questions before examining Khalil's ears. "Both eardrums have been perforated. The tear in the right ear is slightly larger than the left."

After reading the information, Khalil asked, "So, how long will it take for my hearing to return?"

Dr. Moyer shrugged. "Most times the eardrums heal themselves within a few weeks and your hearing will get back to normal. But sometimes it doesn't."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then they may need to be surgically repaired."

"And this will guarantee my hearing will return?"

The doctor shook his head. "I can't guarantee to what degree your hearing will return, or if it will at all. We just have to wait and see."

He didn't even want to think about not being able to hear again or surgery. "How long before you determine whether I have to have surgery?"

"If your hearing hasn't returned in three months, we'll reevaluate our next steps. In the meantime, you'll need to make sure no water gets in them. I'm going to prescribe an antibiotic eardrop to help protect from infections and I want you to make an appointment with my office so we can get you some information

on resources.”

Khalil groaned and closed his eyes. He didn't have time for this. He had too much to do with the new gym opening in three months, the renovations at the current one and the mess with the members. He sensed the doctor moving closer and opened his eyes. He lifted the phone and followed the words on the screen. “No, I don't have any other questions.” Nothing other than why couldn't the man fix the problem right now, instead of waiting?

Brandon poked his head in the door and Khalil waved him in. Not like he'd leave anyway. Khalil was certain Brandon had seen the doctor enter and waited as long as he could. Although marriage had mellowed his big brother somewhat, his intense nature still hovered below the surface. Khalil watched as the doctor and Brandon talked. He assumed Dr. Moyer was sharing the same details he'd given Khalil. Brandon seemed particularly interested in the speech-to-text app and Khalil could see the wheels turning in his brother's head.

Dr. Moyer handed Khalil a card. “Here's my card. You can email me with any questions. I know this is a big change, but there's no reason you can't continue living a full, productive life.” He pointed to the phones. “I'll leave these here for you and your family.”

Khalil nodded. “Thanks.”

As soon as the doctor closed the door, Brandon said, “This is so cool. I'm going to talk to Justin and have him check this out. He may be able to design a better app.”

He rolled his eyes. Just like I thought. Always business. Their brother-in-law, Justin Cartwright, had partnered with Gray Home Safety to market his in-home alert system. The system sent real-time data to a smartphone letting the user know whether a door had been opened, a stove had been left on or if there had been no movement in the house for an extended period. The product gave peace of mind to families whose aging parents wanted to continue living independently. “Did that doctor not just tell you I may not ever get my hearing back? Who cares about that damn app right now? Why does everything have to be about business with you?” Khalil blew out a frustrated breath.

Brandon studied Khalil a long moment, then picked up the phone the doctor had left on the bedside tray. “That’s not what he said at all. He said it could heal in a few weeks. In the meantime, you have the equipment for your new gym to finish designing, as well as overseeing the opening to keep you busy. You know we’ll all help.”

“How in the hell am I supposed to do that? I can’t hear a damn thing! I don’t want to depend on anybody driving me everywhere I go, or have everybody write down whatever they want to say all the time. I can’t live like this,” he gritted out. He sat up abruptly and pain shot through his ribs like a crack of lightning, slapping him back down. Khalil cursed. He clenched his fists and took several shallow breaths. It took several moments for the agony to subside.

Brandon’s calm expression hadn’t changed. “Are you done?”

He paused for a beat. “Khalil, you are one of the smartest people I know. You learned Spanish and French when you had those modeling gigs in Spain and France, earned two degrees while traveling around the globe and single-handedly turned a gym that was folding under the previous owners into one of the best around. Your right hand is sprained, not your left. I don’t know anything about the driving laws, but none of us have a problem taking you wherever you need to go, if necessary. As far as communication...” Brandon held up the device. “Done. Now, Mom and Dad are out there and anxious to get back in here. If you don’t want Mom insisting you move in with them after you leave this hospital, I suggest you get yourself together, little brother.”

Khalil wanted to punch something. But he knew his brother was right. Khalil was thirty-three and had been living on his own since age eighteen, but that wouldn’t mean a thing if his mother thought for one moment that he couldn’t manage on his own. “Fine. Give me a second before you let them in.”

Minutes later, his parents rushed in behind Brandon. The frown on her face and the rapid movement of her mouth gave Khalil the impression that she was fussing at Brandon. Brandon gave him a look that said, “I told you.”

Brandon showed their parents how to work the speech app and his mother took it and rushed over to the bed.

“How are you feeling, baby? Do you need me to get you anything? Where does it hurt? Do I need to have the nurse bring

you something for the pain? Don't worry, when you're released, you can stay with us for a couple of weeks until you're back on your feet."

The words flew across the screen so fast there were no spaces between the questions. "Mom..." The questions continued. "Mom." He reached up and gently pried the thing out of her hand. "Mom." She glared at him. "I'm okay. I do not need to stay with you and Dad. I'll be fine in my own home." Or so he hoped. But, then again, he wouldn't even know if the phone or doorbell rang, or hear his alarm in the mornings. He sighed inwardly.

Over the next half hour, all his siblings came in and out of the room and his mother continued to hover. He appreciated their love and support, but the only thing he wanted was to be alone and prayed that when he woke up in the morning, he'd be able to hear again.

## Chapter 5

Thursday morning, Lexia wrapped up her meeting with the contractor hired to repair the broken windows and hurried over to where Brandon stood near the cash register. From the navy tailored suit he wore today, she assumed he was on his way to work. When he stopped by yesterday, he had on sweatpants and a long-sleeved tee. He'd told her that Khalil had a rough first night and hadn't taken the news about his hearing well. She couldn't imagine what he felt, but remembered the same thing happening to Elyse. Her friend had cried for weeks, became depressed and withdrew from everyone and everything.

“Hi, Brandon. How is he?”

Brandon shook his head. “Same. He won’t eat and is pretty much ignoring everybody except our parents. He may be pissed off, but not enough to risk Mama’s wrath,” he added with a wry chuckle.

“This is going to be a huge adjustment for him and he just needs a little time.” She wanted to go see him so badly, but held back from asking.

“I guess.” He scrubbed a hand down his face. “Maybe you should take him a piece of that coffee cake he’s always raving about. I bet he’d eat that.”

Lexia smiled. “If you’re visiting him today, I can put a slice aside for you to pick up on your way out. We close up at three, but I’ll be here until about four thirty or five.”

Brandon angled his head thoughtfully. “I think it would be better if you delivered it yourself.”

“I...um...” True, she wanted to see Khalil, but what would he think about her showing up at the hospital?

He smiled. “Yeah. That would be perfect.” He glanced down at the expensive gold watch on his arm. “I have a couple of meetings this morning, but I can leave around one thirty to make a quick visit. The lunch rush is pretty much over by then, right?”

“For the most part, yes,” she answered slowly.

“Is there a problem with you being gone for an hour or so?”

Her eyes widened when she realized where the conversation was headed. “Well, no, but—”

“Great. I’ll stop by and drive you over. That way you won’t have to worry about figuring out where to go once you reach the hospital.” He took another quick peek at his watch. “I’ll see you around one thirty. And thanks.” He spun on his heel and strode out the door toward the elevator.

Lexia stood there stunned, wondering what just happened.

“So should I go cut that piece for you, Lexi?”

She spun around and met Sam’s smiling face. “I am not talking to you.”

Sam laughed and brought a hand to her heart. “Why? I didn’t do anything.”

“Exactly. Why didn’t you say something?”

“Something like what?”

Lexia threw up her hands. “I don’t know...something. Since you were over here eavesdropping, I’m sure you heard what his brother said about Khalil ignoring everybody. Besides, I can’t just up and leave.”

Sam folded her arms. “Sure you can. You do it all the time to pick up supplies or run some other errand. And, yes, I did hear what he said. But, like Brandon—that is his name, right?”

She nodded.

“Like Brandon, I believe you’re exactly the person Khalil needs to see. One, the man is clearly interested in you. Two, you make the best guilt-free coffee cake anywhere. And, three, you know precisely how to deal with someone who’s lost their hearing.” She smiled and shrugged. “And if you don’t know what

to say, I'm sure Elyse will be happy to help you." She sighed. "Look, I know you're nervous about starting up with another man, but just think of this as helping a friend for now."

"I guess," Lexia mumbled. Sam was right. It was just helping a friend. Although, she wouldn't really say they were friends since she'd only known him a couple of weeks. "Well, I need to get some work done before then."

Her smile widened. "You can save all the hot stuff for when he's better."

She ignored Sam, rounded the counter and started toward the back.

"So, are you going to cut his piece, or shall I? There isn't very much left."

Lexia groaned, dug out a to-go container and filled it with a slice. She held it up for Sam's approval. "Happy?"

"Khalil will be."

"I'll be in my office." Once there, she placed the container on her desk and dropped down into her chair. Brandon had flipped the conversation and handled her with such finesse she didn't realize what happened until it was too late. "The man is probably ruthless in a boardroom," she muttered, and rotated her chair to her computer.

After two hours, Lexia leaned back and thought about how to manage the visit with Khalil. No doubt he would still be very angry and frustrated. How would he react to her visit? Would he ignore her as he'd done his family? Maybe she should tell

Brandon it might be better if she waited to visit. She drummed her fingers on the desk for a moment then reached for her cell phone to send a text to Elyse. She filled her friend in on the explosion, Khalil's injury and hearing loss and asked for some advice on what to do. She set the phone aside and turned her attention to the revised menu she had been working on.

The phone chimed with a text a while later and Lexia picked it up.

Elyse: I'm so sorry to hear about Khalil. Don't approach him like you and Janice did with me.

Lexia: I don't understand.

Elyse: The 'oh, you poor thing' approach. I'm sure he has enough people doing that. Be yourself, Lexi, and talk to him the same way you did last week. He needs to know that he's still the same, in spite of what's happened.

Lexia: Thanks. :)

Elyse: Let me know how it goes.

Lexia: I will.

"Lexia, Samantha wants to know if you can come out front for a few minutes. She has to deliver a lunch order upstairs."

Lexia's head came up. "Sure, Jayla. Tell her I'll be right there." She placed her cell in the drawer, saved the changes on her file and closed it and donned her apron.

She took orders and delivered food for the next forty-five minutes until the lunch rush had passed and only a handful of customers remained. She started back to the kitchen with an

armload of empty plates and stopped short upon seeing Brandon entering. “Hey, Brandon. Give me a minute.”

Brandon stepped to the side so she could pass. “No problem.”

Lexia placed the dishes in the dishpan and poked her head around the industrial-size refrigerator to speak to the chef. “Mr. Willis, I’ll be gone for about an hour and a half. If there is something you need to add to the inventory list, just leave it on my desk if I’m not back by the time you leave.”

Mr. Willis stuck his bearded face around the door. “You going to get supplies?”

“No. Visit a friend in the hospital.”

He paused. “That fella you were sitting with that got hurt the other day?”

“Yes.” He scrutinized her with an intensity that almost made her squirm.

He wagged a thick finger her way. “You be careful. I don’t want to see you going through the same mess again.”

Lexia smiled. This man had been a fixture in her life since she was a teen and was another inspiration on her journey to become a chef. She remembered him telling her, “Cooking up something that tastes good always makes you feel better.” Over the years, he’d added some girth around his middle and a few lines bracketed his light brown face, but his warm smile had not changed. “Don’t worry. I’ll be fine.” She leaned up and kissed his cheek. “See you in a bit.”

She stopped by her office to get the coffee cake and her purse.

As she lifted it from the drawer, she spotted Khalil's phone and picked it up. She'd totally forgotten about it. On her way out, she passed the small mirror hanging on the wall and realized she still had on the apron and hairnet.

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