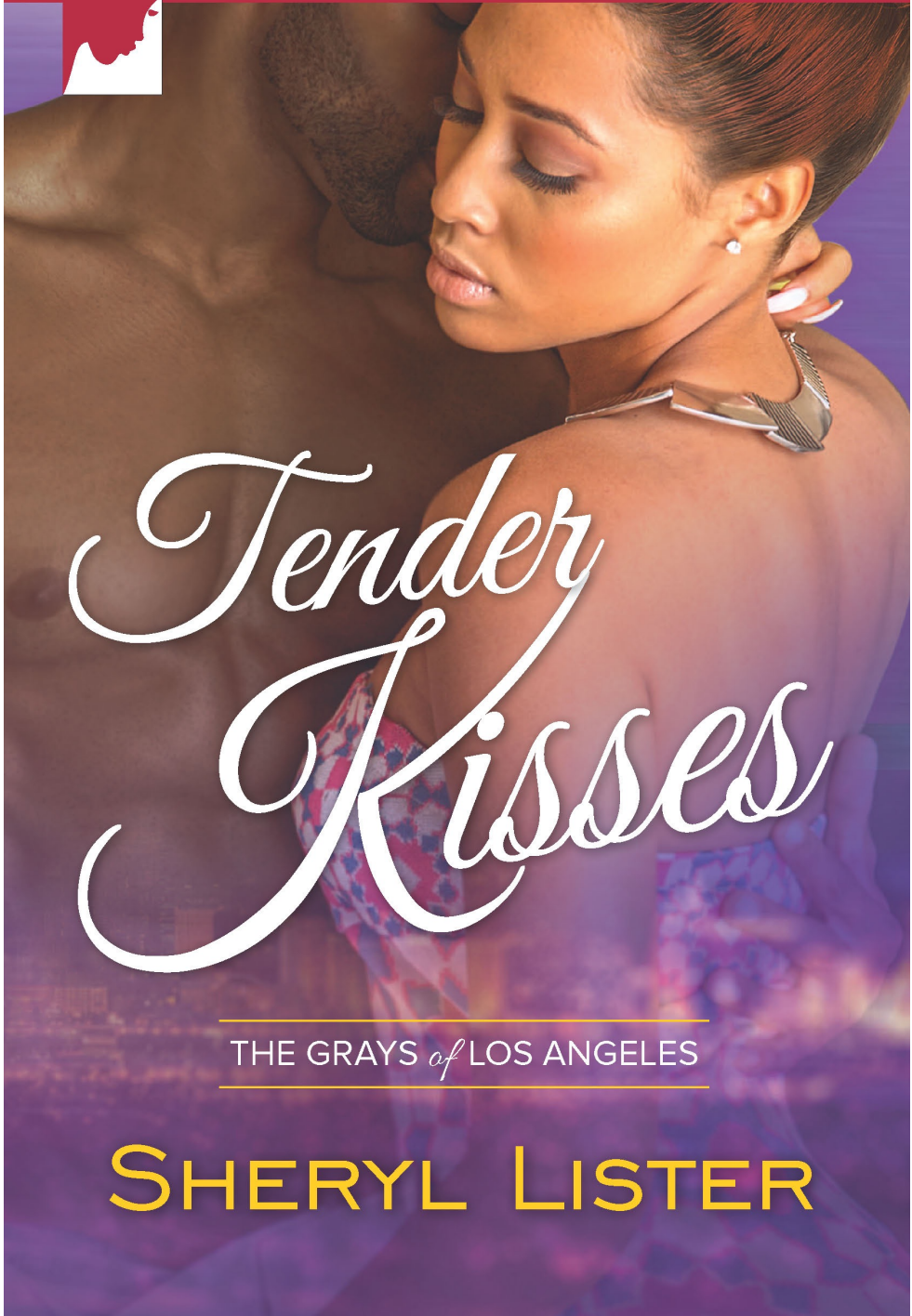


K I M A N I <sup>TM</sup> R O M A N C E



*Tender  
Kisses*

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THE GRAYS *of* LOS ANGELES

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**SHERYL LISTER**

## Chapter 1

*I wonder if I can hold my breath for five minutes.* Siobhan Gray tried to edge away and create some space between her and her dance partner. The potency of the man's cologne—she swore he had bathed in it—had her on the verge of passing out. Instead of holding her breath, maybe she should take one big whiff and put herself out of this misery. The effect would be the same.

“You seem too young to be handling all the PR for your family's company,” he said, breaking into her thoughts.

She pasted a smile on her face while he went on and on about Gray Home Safety. She caught the gazes of her two best friends, who stood across the room with wide grins. Siobhan rolled her eyes and groaned inwardly.

“Did you say something?” Her dance partner asked.

*Had that groan slipped out?* “No, nothing. Just humming along with the music,” she lied. *How long is this song, anyway?* When the song finally ended, he didn't release her.

“Isn't this nice?” he asked, tightening his hold.

*About as nice as dancing naked in an ice storm.* The move came with another gust of his cologne and Siobhan nearly gagged. She was done. “If you’ll excuse me, there’s someone I need to speak to.” She stepped away from him so fast she stumbled, but quickly righted herself.

He caught her arm. “Are you okay?”

She gave him a tense smile. “Fine, thanks. And thank you for the dance.” She turned and started from the floor. Three steps in she realized he was right behind her.

“Hold on a minute.” He chuckled nervously. “I was hoping, Sio— Siyo—”

“*Sha-von*,” she said impatiently.

“Yes, yes. It’s a nice name. What I wanted to ask, *Siobhan* is do you think you can pass along my card to your father? I have this great home—”

Siobhan cut him off and ignored the business card in his hand. “Mr....”

“Benson,” he supplied.

“Mr. Benson, if you have a product, idea, or otherwise, you should speak directly to my father or my brother, Brandon.” She pointed them out. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.” She stalked off without waiting for his reply and headed straight for the balcony.

Once outside, she inhaled deeply and drew in a lungful of the sweet night air. She braced her hands on the railing and tried to rein in her anger. As PR Director for Gray Home Safety, it seemed as if every man in attendance at tonight’s gala thought they could sweet talk their way into the family’s company. Siobhan had only been here for an hour and, so far, four men had approached her. The conversations started pleasantly enough but, within a few minutes, ended the same—with a pitch for the next great thing in home safety. She had heard it all from stair lifts to heated shower chairs.

She was proud of the company her father started upon his discharge from the Army. While he had returned whole, his best friend had not. Disheartened by the difficulty in getting services and accommodations for the disabled, Nolan Gray decided to do something about it by designing them himself. Her father's friend, Thaddeus Whitcomb, joined the company as a minor partner soon after. More than two decades later, the small company housed in their garage was now one of the largest in-home safety companies in the country. Her brother, Khalil, had taken the company to a new level when he designed accessible equipment for the fitness center he opened two years ago.

"Here you are, Siobhan. We wondered where you went."

Siobhan turned from the rail to find her two best friends. "I bet you did, Cynthia."

"We saw you dancing. Was he a nice man?" Cynthia Johnson was a diehard romantic. From the time the three of them became best friends in fourth grade, Cynthia had been planning their happily-ever-after. Siobhan was the only one who hadn't found her prince.

"Of course he wasn't," Kendra Martin tossed out with a chuckle. "Didn't you see her face, Cyn?"

"It couldn't have been that bad."

Kendra leaned close to Siobhan and wrinkled her nose. "Girl, what kind of perfume is that?"

"I'm not wearing any perfume. It must be what's left of Mr. Benson's cologne. I thought I was going to pass out."

Kendra waved a hand. "That is not cologne. It smells more like toi—"

"Don't say it," Cynthia interrupted.

The three women looked at each other and burst out laughing. Siobhan shook her head. “He was the worst of the four men tonight.” She frowned. “I’m tired of men trying to come on to me for the sole purpose of working their way into the family business.” She had already traveled that road and had the remnants of the broken heart to prove it. And, she was still trying to rebuild her bank account from the fiasco.

“Well, if you dressed like you were thirty-three, instead of seventy-three men would be tossing you something more than their business cards,” Kendra said bluntly.

Siobhan stared down at her dress. “What’s wrong with my dress?”

“I think it’s beautiful,” Cynthia said.

Kendra rolled her eyes. “It is a beautiful dress...for my *grandmother*. For one thing, it’s long-sleeved. For another, you’re all buttoned up like a nun. It’s all right to show a little cleavage. And, to be honest, it’s too big.”

Siobhan placed her hand on her hip. “Why don’t you tell me how you really feel, Kendra? I’m not wearing some dress so tight I can barely walk.”

“It doesn’t have to be skintight, but the material should at least do a drive-by on your curves.”

“In case you’ve forgotten, I’m a size fourteen, not four.”

“And with your five-eight height, those curves are in all the right places. Hell, if I had any semblance of your shape, you’d better believe I’d be flaunting it.”

“I don’t do this often,” Cynthia started, “but I have to agree with Kendra this time.”

Siobhan sighed heavily. She knew her body was in good shape, toned and tight in all the right places, but had dressed purposely to keep men at a distance.

“Stop letting Arthur ruin your life,” Cynthia added softly.

She turned back to the rail, not wanting them to see how much Arthur's deception still affected her. After two years, the mention of his name shouldn't conjure up all the same hurt and anger, but it did.

Kendra came and stood next to her. "Siobhan, you have so much going for you. You're intelligent, beautiful and one of the sweetest people I know. Stop hiding. It's time for you to come out and play again. You were always the outgoing, fun one when we were growing up. Ever since—"

"I'm *fine*, Kendra. That was a long time ago and I'm over it." Siobhan's two friends viewed her skeptically. "I'm still the same me—fun and outgoing. I just haven't found anyone to have fun with," she added wryly, trying to lighten the mood. Though, truthfully she hadn't been looking for fun. All she wanted was to do her job and make her family proud.

Cynthia, standing on the other side of Siobhan, playfully bumped Siobhan's shoulder. "You never know, your real prince charming could be here tonight and you're out here sulking."

"I don't know what I'm going to do with you two," Siobhan muttered.

Kendra laughed. "Hey, we're trying to get a couple of godchildren. Cyn's baby girl and this one here," she said rubbing her baby bump, "need a god sister or brother."

She glanced down and smiled. "Somehow, I think I may have to settle for being a godmother." She was thirty-three years old and, as much as she wanted marriage and children, Siobhan didn't see herself allowing another man get close. In fact, she thought it better to officially retire from the game of love altogether.

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"Thanks for the invite." Justin Cartwright shook his long-time friend's hand. He and Robert Mitchell had been college roommates and bonded through their mutual love of

technology. While Justin had continued to pursue a career in technology, Bobby changed directions to help his ailing grandfather run the family's winery.

"No problem, man. I figured with all the home safety companies here tonight, you could get that next idea off the ground. It's even better than the first one. I can't tell you how much I love your first one. Those electronic floor sensors are the best I've seen on the market. If this next one is as good, you'll have companies lined up."

"I appreciate the endorsement, Bobby. Maybe I should have you taking care of marketing," he added with a chuckle.

"Five years ago, I might've taken you up on your offer. Now, I actually like the wine business." Bobby's gaze shifted to a man approaching then back to Justin. "That's Charles Hickson. He might be someone you want to talk to." Bobby had contacts throughout the business world.

Justin nodded and greeted the man in question. He had read up on Hickson's company, as well as several others. But he was interested in only one company—Gray Home Safety, one of the largest in the country. The floor sensors had done well and afforded him a comfortable lifestyle, but partnering with the Grays would catapult Justin's new idea to another level and have far reaching benefits for both parties. He'd researched everything he could find on the company and determined working with them would be his best shot at making his new alert system a household name. "What do you know about Gray Home Safety?"

"The Grays?"

"Yeah. You know them?"

"We met about a year ago. They're cool people, down to earth. At least a couple of his sons and daughters work there. The one brother I met is a sharp businessman. The daughter is a

helluva PR director. I've never seen anybody handle the media and negative press the way she does. On the personal side, she's pretty nice but tends to keep people at a distance. Is that the company you're targeting?"

"Yes. I want the best, and they're it."

Bobby smiled. "I can introduce you, if you want."

"No, thanks. I'm sure I can handle an introduction." Justin scanned the ballroom again and zeroed in on the beautiful woman on the dance floor. He had spotted her when she arrived earlier and noticed that she carried herself with the regal bearing of a queen. She was tall, wore her hair in a short, curly style and had him absolutely mesmerized. He hadn't been able to keep his concentration on the task at hand for staring at her. His gaze narrowed. That was the third or fourth man he had seen her dancing with. Either she was very popular or she was somebody big in the safety industry. The latter didn't bother him because he had only one company in mind. He kept one eye on her while sipping his drink and listening to Bobby. When the song ended, Justin watched as the man followed the woman from the dance floor and handed her what appeared to be a business card. Just as he suspected, the man was trying to pitch his idea. "Excuse me, Bobby. I want to do some mingling. I'll catch up with you later."

Bobby nodded. "Good luck. Not that you need it. Let me know if there's anything I can do. I'm cutting out early. So, I'll call you later this week."

The two men parted ways and Justin headed in the direction he saw her go. Halfway there, a man caught his arm.

"Well, if it isn't Justin Cartwright. How've you been?" he said, grabbing Justin's hand.

The man pumped Justin's arm so hard he thought it would fall off. "Just fine, sir."



He grinned. “I’ve been keeping up with you and hearing some great things about your sensors.”

“Really?” Three years ago, Justin had approached the man about backing his floor sensors and had been all but tossed out of the office. But, he had persevered without any backing and now his floor sensors were among the best available.

“Yes, yes. So, do you have any new products coming to market?”

“Not yet. If you’ll excuse me, I need to speak to someone. Enjoy your evening.” Not waiting for a reply, he left the man standing there. As much as he wanted to tell the man exactly where he could go, Justin didn’t believe in burning bridges in business. Now it was back to his original mission—the beauty in gold. For a moment, he lost her in the crowd then spotted her exiting to the balcony on the far side of the room. Two other people stopped him before he made it to the balcony.

“If I have to dance with one more scheming stuff shirt, I swear I’m going to give him a swift kick in the shin with the pointed toe of this shoe. I bet he’ll think twice...” he heard her say as he reached the open door.

Justin went still. He took two steps back, pivoted and headed for the bar. *Damn!* He had to rethink his strategy. He ordered a Coke, not wanting anything to cloud his thinking. He took the drink out to the opposite balcony and leaned against the rail. “Now, what?” he muttered. Truth be told, he shouldn’t be worried about a woman. He had more pressing things on his plate, like making sure his alert system was perfected and talking with Mr. Gray tonight. He sipped his drink and stared at the grounds below. A slow smile curved his mouth as an idea came to him. He was great at multitasking and only wanted a dance. There would be plenty of time to get that pitch in. Justin downed the remainder of his drink and went back inside.

He greeted and made small talk with several people, all while maneuvering closer to the woman. “Good evening, ladies.” She stood talking with two other women and seeing her from a distance had not come close to capturing her beauty, especially her eyes. They were a lighter shade of brown and a perfectly complemented her golden brown skin. Soft laughter from one of the women made him realize he was staring like an awestruck teen. Justin quickly gathered himself and stuck out his hand to the first woman, who was still smiling. “I’m Justin Cartwright.”

“Kendra Martin. Nice to meet you, Justin.”

“I’m Cynthia Johnson,” the second woman said, extending her hand.

“Nice to meet you both.” He turned slightly to face the woman he had been studying all night. “And you are?”

“Siobhan. Siobhan Hunter,” she said, shaking his outstretched hand.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Siobhan,” Justin said, his eyes never leaving hers. The warmth flowing from her touch gave him pause. The slight widening of her eyes and the way she pulled back let him know he wasn’t the only one who felt it. “Are you ladies enjoying yourselves?”

“Yes,” Siobhan and Cynthia chorused.

Kendra angled her head. “Let’s say the night just got more interesting.”

Justin lifted a brow. “Is that right?”

“Definitely.” She hooked her arm with the other woman and led her away. “Come on, Cynthia. We should probably go find our husbands. You know how they get. Nice to meet you, Justin,” she called over her shoulder. “Chat with you later, Siobhan.”

He chuckled. “She’s real subtle, isn’t she?”

“You’ll have to excuse Kendra.”

“No harm done. Since she left us all alone, I say we take advantage of it. I wouldn’t want her efforts to go to waste.”

Siobhan smiled and said softly, “I guess not.”

“Would you like to dance?”

She hesitated briefly then placed her soft hand in his.

Justin led her out to the dance floor, slid his arm around her waist and pulled her close to his body, but was careful enough to leave a respectable space between them. He didn’t want to scare her off, or potentially feel the pointed toe of her shoe in his shin before he had a chance to finish the dance. “So, are you with one of the safety companies?” She turned her face to meet his eyes. In her heels, she stood only a couple inches shorter than his six-one height.

She stiffened in his embrace. “Yes, why?”

“I assume since this is a safety awards gala that everyone here is either affiliated with a company or looking to do so. And I was wondering if you enjoyed your job.”

“Let me guess. You have the next greatest safety invention you want to pitch,” she said almost accusingly.

Remembering the look on her face when the last man handed her his card, he said, “Actually, I just want to dance with you. Have we met before? You seem familiar—”

Siobhan viewed him skeptically. “Really?” She stepped out of his arms, held out her hand and said curtly, “How about we skip to the part where you hand me your business card and stop wasting my time?”

*A no nonsense sister.* Justin reclaimed the distance and pulled her back into his embrace. “I don’t have a business card to give you.” Well, that wasn’t exactly true. He had several in his

breast pocket but, since he had only finagled an invite to this shindig to meet someone from Gray Home Safety, which she wasn't part of, he didn't want to pull one out and ruin his chances.

She stared at him for several seconds then relaxed in his arms. "So, Justin, are you in the home safety business?"

"I have a couple of products on the market," he answered carefully. He felt her body stiffen again and added quickly, "And I like working for myself." They continued swaying to the slow jazz tune without conversing. Someone bumped Siobhan, pushing her closer to his body and he groaned inwardly. Her voluptuous body molded to his and it took every inch of his control not to take advantage. His hands wanted nothing more than to tour each curve and conduct his own private touch test. Easing back a fraction, Justin hit the brakes on his runaway thoughts. He needed to remember the plan—a dance then find Mr. Gray. And that plan didn't include fantasies of exploring a more personal relationship with Siobhan Hunter. Now, if he could just get his body to go along...

