

## 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 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. Brandon 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 into 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 in 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 her thick, wavy natural hair back, 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 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 fundraiser benefitting 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 waved to sat.

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 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.

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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 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 Hughes 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 and 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 Lexia 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 nut job out there stealing your client's 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 because of the weightlifting. The woman had complained the entire session. It wasn’t 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 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.

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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 doorframe. “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 blocked. 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 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.”

“Any time 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 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 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 U.S. 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 pre-heated 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 dove 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, 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 subdivision.” 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 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 mid sentence 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.” Logan Smith was the manager.

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 backwards 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.