

K I M A N I R O M A N C E



All
of
Me

SHERYL LISTER

Chapter 1

Karen Morris stood off to the side in the Sapphire Room, one of the cruise ship's private dining rooms, smiling as her best friend approached. "Girl, you look so beautiful." Janae Simms had just exchanged wedding vows with popular R&B artist and producer, Terrence "Monte" Campbell.

Janae smoothed a hand over the bodice of her white chiffon strapless A-line gown with a beaded motif accent at the hip. "Thanks."

"So, how does it feel to be a married woman?"

"I never thought I'd be this happy."

"Yeah. If that smile gets any wider, you'll be competing with the sun."

Janae giggled and looped her arm in Karen's. "I'm so glad you're my friend."

"Me, too."

"Come on. You need to help me eat some of my cake. We'll have a chance to talk more over lunch Monday."

"Lunch? Aren't you and Terrence going to be a little busy this week?"

Janae smiled and wiggled her eyebrows. “We’ll be plenty busy, but he has to rehearse for his show that’s on Wednesday night.” He was one of several performers on the weeklong jazz cruise. “So, are we on for lunch?”

“Definitely.”

After she ate small piece of cake, Janae’s brother, Devin, asked Karen to dance. Then she enjoyed dances with Janae’s other two brothers and father. She started toward to her table only to be pulled back to the floor by Donovan Wright, Terrence’s the best man and manager. By the time the short affair concluded, her feet were killing her.

Janae came up behind her. “Karen, we’re leaving now. What time do you want to meet on Monday?”

She grinned and glanced over to where Terrence stood watching them. “Maybe you should be the one to decide. Your new husband looks like he’s ready to eat you up.”

“The feeling is mutual. How about one o’clock?”

“That’ll work. I’ll meet you at the entrance to the buffet.” They spent another minute talking and then Karen said, “Enjoy your wedding night.”

“I plan to,” Janae said with a wink.

Karen smiled and shook her head recalling how the two had met. She had practically dragged Janae to Terrence’s—or Monte, as he was known in the music world—concert. What started as a backstage meet-and-greet after the concert had ended in marital bliss for her friend. She briefly wondered if she would get her own fairy-tale ending, then shoved the thought aside. *The only thing I’m focusing on is having a good time for the next week. Good music, good food, fabulous islands...me time.*

Janae's parents and Terrence's grandparents had elected not to cruise, so Karen stayed behind with Janae's brothers to see them off. She followed the family back down the hallway leading to the ship's entrance where they would disembark. As they said their goodbyes, male laughter drew her attention.

She turned to see three men standing nearby engaged in a lively conversation. All three were good-looking, but one in particular piqued her interest. He stood a few inches taller than his companions, with broad shoulders and the muscular build of a professional athlete. Her gaze lingered over his smooth golden brown features—close-cropped dark hair, chiseled jaw and full lips curved in a slight smile. The man was a serious piece of eye candy. Her gaze traveled over his body then back up to his face to find him watching her with quiet intensity. Her heart rate kicked up a notch. Embarrassed that he had caught her staring, she quickly turned away. Moments later, she couldn't resist another peek.

Suddenly, he paused with the drink halfway to his lips and swung his head in her direction. His smile inched up and he saluted her with his drink. Her breath stalled in her lungs.

“Karen?”

“Huh, what?” She tore her gaze away and tried to focus on what Janae's mother was saying. “I'm sorry. What did you say, Mrs. Simms?”

She chuckled. “I asked if you were going to miss your students this week.”

“I love my little darlings, but I plan to enjoy a week without lesson plans and mediating ‘he said, she said’ arguments.”

After a few minutes of polite conversation and a round of hugs, Karen wound her way around the ship toward her suite. Several men called out greetings and offered to buy her a drink, and one propositioned her for more, but she ignored them all. A vision of Mr. Eye Candy worked

its way into her mind and she pushed it away, reminding herself that she was taking a break from men and focusing on herself and her career goals.

Damian Bradshaw half listened to his friends as they once again listed all the reasons why this cruise was a good idea. The cruise was an annual event and they had invited him several times over the years, but he always declined.

Troy Ellis slung an arm around his shoulder. “Man, you can’t tell me you’re not looking forward to some fun aboard a luxury cruise. Good music, good food, exotic ports—”

“And a ship full of fine, single women,” Kyle Jamison cut in. “Um, um, um,” he said, staring after a group of women walking by and smiling at them. “See what I mean? Damian, this is exactly what you need to get back in the groove.”

“Who says I want to get back in the groove?” Damian muttered.

Troy dropped his arm and shook his head. “It’s been five years, Damian. When do you think you’ll be ready to move on?”

Damian clenched his jaw. He didn’t need to be reminded how long it had been since he lost his wife. He had lived every one of those moments without her, counted every second since she’d died from a freak accident. He had no desire to open his heart to the possibility of pain again. “I have moved on.”

Kyle crossed his arms and pinned Damian with a glare. “Have you really? You’re one step up from a recluse. You’re either at the office, at the gym or locked in your house. You probably don’t even remember how to date.”

“We have a lot to do at the office,” Damian countered. The three friends co-owned a consulting firm and traveled around the country providing safety training to schools and corporate groups.

“All of which our dynamic office assistant, Delores, can handle until we get back. He’s right, Damian,” Troy said softly. “It’s time. Joyce wouldn’t want you to live the rest of your life alone.” He grinned. “And, since we know you’ve been out of the game for a while, we’ll be more than happy to offer you some pointers on how to attract a woman,” he added, trying to lighten the mood.

Damian chuckled. “Yeah, I bet.”

“We need to get this party started right. I’m going to get a drink,” Kyle said.

Troy nodded. “Good idea. Let’s go.”

“I’ll wait for you guys.”

“You want me to bring you something?” Troy asked.

“Yeah. Bring me a beer.” He watched them saunter off and flirt with two passing women.

He leaned against the railing, shoved his hands into his pockets and contemplated his friends’ words. He hated to admit it, but they were right. He’d immersed himself in his job, staying at the office way past normal hours, working out at the gym to the point of exhaustion then going home to an empty house and losing himself in thoughts of what could have been, what should have been. Damian rarely did anything that could be considered fun and hadn’t thought about taking a trip. Even when Joyce was alive, she preferred a quiet evening at home to going out or leaving town, so they’d never traveled far. When they did, they only went on occasional weekend getaways. He took in his surroundings. Boarding passengers streamed past

him, their animated chatter and excitement filling the air. He couldn't remember the last time he had taken a real vacation. Maybe he needed this cruise after all.

"Here you go."

He accepted the beer from Troy. "Thanks."

Kyle held up his bottle. "I'd like to propose a toast. To a week of great music and endless pleasures."

"Hear, hear!" Troy said.

They looked at Damian expectantly. Sighing, he clinked his bottle against theirs then tilted it to his lips.

Kyle smiled. "Now, the first lesson when picking up women is to find one who wants no attachments beyond the week and is just out for a good time."

"Usually, she'll be with a group of women, make eye contact and check you out from head to toe," Troy added.

Kyle nodded. "She'll find a way to cross your path at least twice, be wearing an enticing little number and give you a smile that says she's up for whatever you want."

"If you're interested, return her smile but don't approach her right away." Troy leaned closer. "Continue to flirt from a distance, maybe send her a drink. You know, heighten the desire."

"Now you're ready to make your move," Kyle said, clapping Damian on the shoulder.

"And, because we knew you wouldn't, we slipped a couple boxes of condoms into your bag," Troy finished with a smug smile. "Think about it, this'll be the perfect way to make that first step back into the land of the living."

“I’m thirty-three years old. I don’t need you to tell me how to approach a woman,” Damian gritted out. Kyle and Troy laughed. “What?”

“Man, you’ve been out of the game so long, you wouldn’t know what to say, even if she held up a sign saying ‘Unattached and Available.’” Kyle paused thoughtfully. “Actually, you never really dated at all since you and Joyce sort of hooked up in college.”

He skewered Kyle with a look.

“You know I’m right. Yeah, you dated a few women back then—and I use the term *dated* loosely—but you and Joyce always circled back to each other.”

Rather than responding and risk knocking Kyle out, he took another swig of his beer.

“Lay off Damian, Kyle. Give the brother a chance. We’ve only been on the boat for forty-five minutes and we haven’t even left the dock yet.”

“Yeah. Lay off. I’m perfectly capable of deciding whether I want a woman or not.” Though he mostly subscribed to the “or not” category. He had gone out a few times since his wife’s death, but never progressed past a couple of dates and a few chaste kisses.

Kyle gave him a sidelong glance. “You sure? Because I can’t have you embarrassing me and ruining my reputation with some lame pickup lines.”

Damian shook his head and laughed, giving in to Kyle’s whack sense of humor. “Man, I don’t know how we’ve been friends all these years.”

“Hell, you need somebody to keep you straight. Leaving you to your own devices, we might find you living as a monk with no sense of humor.” They all laughed.

“Whatever.”

Out of his periphery, he noticed a woman staring his way. She was standing in a group with two older couples, a younger couple and two other men. Their eyes locked and he felt a kick

in the gut. An embarrassed expression crossed her face and she turned away. He willed her to look his way again, wanting to know if he'd imagined the spark of awareness. When she finally glanced back, he felt it again. A slow grin made its way over his face and he saluted her with his bottle.

“Earth to Damian.” Troy waved his hand in front of Damian’s face.

Damian jerked back. “What?”

“Are you listening? What are you looking at?”

“Nothing,” he murmured. He idly sipped his drink while scanning the woman from head to toe. She had flawless mocha skin and a strikingly beautiful face. The strapless gray dress she wore clung subtly to her lush curves and gave way to long, toned legs, and stirred a desire he had never experienced, or at least hadn’t experienced in a long time. He frowned, not liking the direction of his thoughts.

“Whoa. Hold up. I *know* you’re not staring at the woman in the gray dress,” Kyle said.

“Didn’t you hear anything I just said?” He shook his head. “Nah, bro, don’t even go there. Nothing about her says ‘I just want a good time.’ She has *permanent* and *keeper* stamped all over her. She’s standing with old people, for goodness sake!”

Damian ignored Kyle and continued to observe the woman as she hugged the older couples and then weaved her way through the crowd. A few men tried to stop her, but she shook her head and kept walking. One man couldn’t seem to take no for an answer and reached out to grab her. He handed his bottle to Troy.

“I’ll be right back.” He moved with determined strides toward the woman.

As the man approached, Damian heard him say, “Hey, beautiful. How about you keep me company this week? I promise to show you a good time.”

Clearly he'd had too much to drink if his slurred voice was any indication.

"No thanks." She gasped sharply when the man grabbed her around the waist and pulled her to him.

"Aw, come on."

A scowl settled on her beautiful face. "You have about one second to remove your arm or—"

"You heard the lady," Damian interrupted. "I'm sure you don't want your cruise to end before the boat leaves the dock." The man spun around and opened his mouth to speak, but obviously thought better of it. Damian towered over the man by a good six inches and outweighed him by forty pounds of pure muscle.

The man dropped his arm, muttered something about stuck-up women and took off down the corridor.

Damian glanced at the woman who barely reached his shoulder in her heels. "Are you okay?"

"I...yes. Thank you. Although I could have handled it."

He chuckled in faint amusement. "I have no doubts about that. Would you like an escort to your room or will you be all right?"

"I'll be fine. Thanks again."

"My pleasure. Perhaps I'll see you again."

"Perhaps."

Damian followed the sway of her hips until she was out of sight then made his way back over to where his friends waited.

“Please don’t tell me you made a move on that woman.” Kyle lit into Damian as soon as he returned.

“Give it a rest, Kyle. I saw a guy harassing her and just made sure she was okay. I didn’t even get her name.”

“What do you mean you didn’t get her name? Man, you’re more out of practice than I thought,” Troy said with a laugh.

Damian rolled his eyes. “Shut up, Troy. Like I said before, I don’t know why I still keep you guys around. I have plenty of time to find out her name...if I want to.”

Troy’s eyebrows shot up. “Sounds like you’re interested.”

He glanced over his shoulder in the direction she had gone then faced his friends. “Maybe.” Up close, she was even more beautiful and damn if he wasn’t attracted to her. As Kyle noted, everything about her shouted *relationship*, not *fling*. But he wasn’t looking for either, or was he? At any rate, things were starting to look up. Coming on this cruise might not have been such a bad idea after all, especially if he got a chance to spend a little time with his mystery lady. Yep, things were definitely looking up.

Karen felt the heat of her rescuer’s gaze on her back, but she refused to turn around. The man was positively scrumptious with a rich, deep voice that poured over her like warm melted chocolate. From a distance she hadn’t been able to discern the color of his eyes, but with him standing so near, she could see the green flecks in his light brown eyes—eyes that reflected friendliness and something else she couldn’t identify. He didn’t seem like the usual guy on the prowl. She shook her head to clear her thoughts. Why did she even care? She didn’t. Or at least, that was what she told herself.