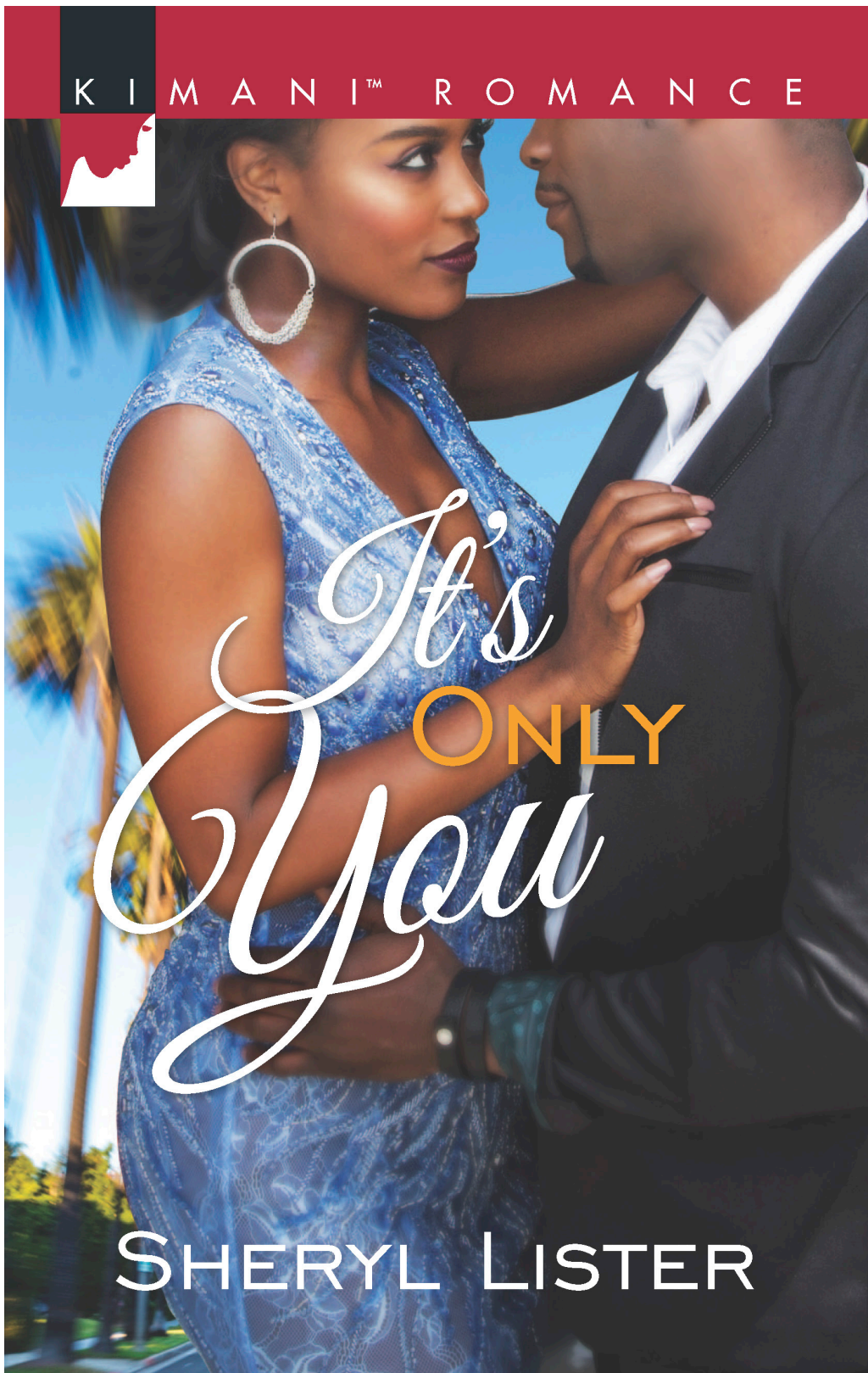


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SHERYL LISTER



Chapter 1

“Simona, Dr. Harris has been looking for you.”

Simona Andrews barely stifled an eye roll. She had been on her feet for ten hours in the hospital’s emergency room and was too tired to deal with Dr. Harris’ antics tonight. “Why? There are several other nurses on duty.”

“True, but you’re the only one on tonight with pediatric experience,” the other nurse answered.

“Where is he?”

“Exam room four.”

“Thanks,” Simona called over her shoulder, increasing her pace. She hoped the good doctor really had a patient this time. Then she heard the crying—well, screaming actually—from two doors away.

“Thank God,” Dr. Harris muttered when he looked up and saw her enter. “Ms. Andrews, Thomas here is a victim of little brother syndrome.”

He placed a subtle hand on her back, and she immediately moved out of his reach. “Hi, Thomas.”

The doctor quickly explained that the child’s mother had brought the two year-old into the hospital’s emergency room when he wouldn’t stop crying and couldn’t move his right arm. Further questioning revealed that the woman’s teenaged son had been swinging Thomas around in circles by his wrists, resulting in Thomas’ right shoulder dislocating.

Simona moved closer to the table where Thomas sat crying, shaking his head and clinging to his mother. She knew the doctor could easily maneuver the joint back into place, but not without some pain to the child. She produced a small stuffed tiger from her pocket and extended it to him. He stared at it for a lengthy moment then reached out to touch it. Gradually, his tears stopped.

“Does your arm hurt?” she asked softly.

He nodded, and his lip began quivering again.

She pointed to the tiger. “That’s why I brought you my special friend. I think his name is the same as yours—Thomas the Tiger—and he helps little boys be brave when they get hurt. Would you like to hold him?”

He looked down at the tiger then back up at her as if trying to decide whether Simona was telling the truth. Finally he nodded again and took it from her outstretched hand.

Simona smiled. “Now, Dr. Harris is going to fix your arm, but it might hurt a little, so Thomas the Tiger is going to stay right in your arms to help you be brave. Is that okay?”

He glanced at the doctor, back to Simona and then laid his head against his mother.

She caught the doctor’s eye, and he maneuvered closer to the little boy’s injured shoulder. While she told Thomas stories of the tiger’s adventures with other little children, Dr.

Harris worked quickly. Thomas winced and let out a small whimper, but by then the doctor had finished and stepped back.

“Wow, Thomas. You did a great job,” Simona praised. “You didn’t even cry.”

He gave her a shy smile.

“You’re such a big boy,” his mother said, kissing his forehead. “Thank you, doctor.”

“No problem, Mrs. Peters.” He gave her some precautions and patted Thomas on the knee.

“And thank you, Ms. Andrews. I don’t think my baby would’ve let the doctor touch him if you hadn’t been here. You even calmed me down,” Mrs. Peters added with a chuckle.

Simona smiled and gently stroked Thomas’ back. “You’re welcome. Take care, Thomas and no more human airplanes.” He reached for Simona, catching her off guard, and she hugged the toddler.

His mother stared. “I can’t believe it. He never goes to strangers. You must be a baby whisperer, Ms. Andrews.”

“I’ve said the same thing,” Dr. Harris murmured.

Ignoring the doctor, she laughed. “I don’t know about that, Mrs. Peters, but I love children.”

“Do you have any children of your own?”

“No. But I’m a proud aunt.”

“Well, you’re going to make a terrific mother someday.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” the doctor chimed in with a gleam in his eyes that went well beyond professional.

She sent a warning look his way, then turned back. “Thank you, Mrs. Peters. Let me show you to the discharge area.”

Dr. Harris chuckled. “Have a good evening, Mrs. Peters, and take care, Thomas.”

Glaring at him over her shoulder, Simona ushered Mrs. Peters out before she could ask any more personal questions.

“Is my son going to be okay?” the woman asked nervously as they walked out.

She smiled reassuringly. “Your son will be fine, Mrs. Peters, but please make sure you tell your other children not to swing Thomas by his arms. As the doctor said, at this age his joints have not completely developed and it’s easy for them to slip out.”

“Thank you, I will. Believe me, if I see one of them so much as tug on Thomas’s arm, *they’re* going to be the ones in the emergency room.” She shook her head. “I’ve told them over and over to quit swinging him around. Wait until I get home,” she fussed. She cradled Thomas against her shoulder and stroked his back lovingly while avoiding his injured side.

After leaving the woman with the discharge clerk, Simona headed back to the nurse’s station still seething. Doctor Lionel Harris had been coming on to her since she started working at the hospital, taking every opportunity to make suggestive comments. He had even gone so far as to lure her into an empty treatment room under the guise of needing assistance with a patient. At thirty-six, he had been featured on the covers of several magazines and was a sought-after lecturer for his knowledge of emergency medicine. Combined with his charm and good looks, he’d be the perfect guy for some woman—just not her. But for some reason, he couldn’t take no for an answer.

Simona had relocated to Los Angeles from Oakland a year ago to escape the drama that had become her life, and she had no desire to hook up with someone as famous as Dr. Harris and

have her relationship play out for all to see. And that would be exactly what would happen if she—a nurse—started dating one of the most attractive doctors on staff. Had it not been for her grandmother, she might have moved clear across the country after breaking up with her ex. LA was close enough to Nana, but big enough to get lost in. Now, she only wanted to do her job and go home—no drama and no men.

“Hey, Simona. What are you doing here? I thought you were off at seven.”

“Hey, Phyllis. I was supposed to be, but Annette called in sick and Dr. Cortez asked if I’d cover the first four hours. Betty is covering the rest of the shift. Then I’m off until Tuesday morning.”

Phyllis nodded. “Lucky you. One hour to go. Right before all the heavy weekend drama starts.”

The weekends were always busy in the emergency room—more parties and drinking often translated to more fights and accidents. Simona was glad to be off.

Another nurse rushed over to them and clutched Simona’s arm. “Oh, my God!” she whispered excitedly. “You’re never going to guess who’s here in the hospital.”

“Who?” Phyllis asked.

“*Monte*. I think his wife is having a baby. He is sooo fine, and his music...” She sighed dreamily.

Simona stared at the young nurse, whose name she couldn’t remember, and shook her head. She’d heard of the popular R&B singer and producer, and owned a few of his CDs, but had no idea he had a wife or that she was expecting a baby.

“We should go up and see if we can get his autograph. I have all his CDs.”

Simona glanced down at the woman's badge. "No, we shouldn't, Alyssa," she said firmly. "What we *should* do is allow the man to have some privacy. This is a hospital, not a concert venue. How about displaying a little professionalism?" People not respecting other's privacy topped the list of Simona's pet peeves.

Alyssa had the decency to look embarrassed...for about five seconds. "It's just a little autograph. Geez, lighten up."

Simona was poised to give Alyssa a blistering retort, but the sound of sirens interrupted whatever she had planned to say. She and Phyllis shared a look and rushed off with Alyssa trailing them.

*

Donovan Wright pushed through the hospital doors and went to the front desk. "Can you tell me what floor maternity is on?"

"Fourth," the older woman behind the desk answered with a smile. "Is this your first?"

His heart clenched. "It's not mine. I'm here for a friend."

"Oh. I just thought...well, a handsome guy like you should have no problem finding a wife."

He smiled, thanked her then sauntered off toward the elevators, his loafers echoing loudly on the highly polished floors.

As he waited for the elevator, he pondered the woman's statement. No problem finding a wife? *Yeah. Right.* Donovan stepped in when the doors opened, pushed the button for the fourth floor and leaned his head back against the wall. Closing his eyes, he exhaled deeply. He was exhausted. With Terrence out of the office for the past week, Donovan had been working sixteen-hour days at the record company just to keep up. As the Executive Vice President of RC

Productions, he oversaw most of the departments and had managed the music career of Terrence—who used the stage name Monte—for the past decade, along with one other group at the record label. He'd been up to his eyeballs scheduling tour dates, negotiating fees, going over contracts and meeting with the various entities. If not for his two assistants, he would, more than likely, still be sitting at his desk despite the fact that it was nine-thirty. Two years ago, both he and Terrence worked long hours at the record company Terrence started. With Terrence taking on the role of CEO and producer, and working on his own music, they'd had no choice. But since Terrence and Janae married, his friend made a point of not staying late as often as he used to. Now, with the new baby, Donovan wondered if Terrence would be working even less, and if they would need to hire another executive just to keep up.

The elevator doors opened on the fourth floor and he followed the signs to the nurse's station. Before he could ask, Donovan spotted Terrence and met him halfway. He brought Terrence in for a one-armed hug.

“What's up man? The baby here yet?”

“Hey, D. Not yet,” Terrence answered.

“You look exhausted. How's Janae holding up?”

“It's been over eight hours, and I know she's in a lot of pain, but she refuses to take anything. She wants to do this naturally.” He scrubbed a hand over his head. “I feel so helpless.”

Donovan clapped him on the shoulder. “Well, hopefully it won't be much longer. What are the doctors saying?”

“They just checked her and said she's eight centimeters dilated, so I'm praying it won't be much longer. I was on my way to the waiting room to tell my grandparents before I go back in.”

“They’re here?” Donovan asked, following Terrence.

“You know they’ll be here all night, if necessary. They’re more excited than we are.”

Donovan laughed. “I can imagine.”

Terrence’s grandparents had been his only family until he married Janae. Both were in their seventies, but rose swiftly when the two men entered.

“Is my great-grandbaby here yet?” Terrence’s grandmother asked.

“Not yet, Grandma.” He told her the same thing he’d told Donovan.

“Hi, Donovan. I didn’t expect to see you here tonight. Terrence told me about all the late hours you’ve been working.”

“Hey, Grandma. You know I had to be here for the birth of my first godchild.” Donovan leaned down to kiss her cheek. He extended his hand to Terrence’s grandfather. “How’s it going, Mr. Campbell?”

“Can’t complain.”

“I need to get back,” Terrence said.

“I’ll wait here with your grandparents, T. Give Janae my best.”

“I will,” he called over his shoulder, hurrying off.

Donovan sprawled out on a loveseat, dangling his legs over the armrest. He spent a few minutes catching up with the grandparents then asked, “How long have you two been here?”

“About four hours,” Mr. Campbell answered.

“Let’s hope it won’t be much longer,” Grandma said. “I’m so glad Terrence found someone to share his life with. You know, Donovan, if my stubborn, commitment-phobic grandson can find a wife, I’m certain you can too,” she added casually.

Uh-oh. “I’ve been too busy to even think about a relationship.”

“Well, no time like the present to slow down and smell a few roses. Don’t you think? What happened to the young lady you were seeing a while back? She came with you to one or two of the barbeques. The two of you seemed quite serious and I thought for sure there’d be wedding bells in your future.”

Donovan leaned back, closed his eyes and frowned at the mention of his ex-girlfriend. Rolonda Evans had committed, what he considered, an unpardonable sin—she’d betrayed his trust in so many ways. In his mind, no trust equaled no relationship. “We broke up a long time ago.”

“Hmm, so you haven’t found someone else?”

“No ma’am.” And he hadn’t been looking. He sincerely prayed this birth wouldn’t take long. Miss Ellie was worse than his mother. Since his mother lived far from LA, he could dodge her easily. Not so much with Terrence’s grandmother. However, now that his small circle of friends had all married, lately he was starting to feel like a fifth wheel.

“Ellie, quit badgering the boy,” Mr. Campbell said with a chuckle.

She shrugged. “He calls me Grandma, and that gives me privileges.”

Had he known Eleanor Campbell’s sweet offer to call her Grandma came with *privileges*, he would have refused it in a heartbeat and run in the opposite direction. Maybe it wasn’t too late to go back to Mrs. Campbell or Miss Ellie.

“One of the ladies in my yoga class mentioned that her great-niece had just moved to the city. I saw a picture, and she’s absolutely gorgeous. I think she’s around thirty—”

Donovan sat up abruptly, swung his legs around and jumped up. “Um, Miss Ellie...”

She laughed. “So, we’re back to Miss Ellie, huh? All right. I’ll leave you alone for now.”

Miss Ellie pointed a finger his way. “But you need a wife.”

Before he could form a response, Terrence burst through the door.

“We have a baby girl,” Terrence announced with tears in his eyes. “A beautiful five-pound, three ounce baby girl.”

“Oh, my,” Miss Ellie cried.

“Congratulations, son.” Mr. Campbell engulfed Terrence in a bear hug.

“Congratulations, T,” Donovan added. “How are mom and baby?”

“Janae is understandably exhausted, but she’s good. They’re checking the baby now. Since she’s almost a month early, they want to be sure nothing is wrong. But my girl has a set of lungs already. I think she’s gonna sing with her daddy,” Terrence said proudly. “Let me get back. I’ll come get you guys in a little while.”

Forty-five minutes later, Terrence escorted the trio to Janae’s room. Donovan hung back to allow Terrence’s grandparents some time with their new great-granddaughter.

“Donovan, come meet your goddaughter,” Janae said.

He approached the bed, leaned down and placed a kiss on Janae’s cheek.

“Congratulations, Mama. She’s a beauty. Thank goodness she takes after you and not Terrence,” he joked.

They all laughed, then Terrence said, “Don’t mess around and get your godfather card revoked in the first hour.”

Janae handed him the baby. “Say hello to Nadia Elise Campbell.”

Donovan gently cradled the tiny bundle against his chest. He placed a soft kiss on her forehead. “Hey, Nadia. I’m your Uncle Donovan. You and I are going to have so much fun together.” He dug his cell out of his pocket and handed it to Terrence. “Get a shot of me with my little goddaughter. Oh, and take a couple extras. You know Mrs. Lewis will have my head if I

show up Monday morning without pictures.” Mrs. Lewis was Terrence’s secretary and the older woman loved Terrence like a son.

“No lie.” Terrence laughed, snapped a few pictures and handed the phone back.

Donovan pocketed the phone and adjusted the baby in his arms. She opened her eyes, stretched and then closed her eyes again. Emotions unlike anything he had ever felt engulfed him and he couldn’t stop staring at the petite baby with a head full of dark curls framing her small face.

“You okay, D?” Terrence asked.

Donovan blinked back the tears clouding his vision, lifted his head and met Terrence’s scrutinizing gaze. “Yeah, man.” He transferred Nadia to her father.

“We’ve known each other a long time and I know something’s up. This isn’t the first time I’ve noticed it,” he whispered.

Donovan ignored the comment. “Does Karen know Nadia came a little early?”

Terrence raised a brow, but didn’t press. “No. She and Damian are finally taking their honeymoon cruise.” Karen was Janae’s best friend. She’d gotten married several months earlier, but due to her job as an elementary school principal, they’d postponed the honeymoon until after the school year ended.

Donovan took a quick peek at his watch. “It’s after eleven o’clock. I need to get out of here. I have an early morning telephone conference.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Fine. You just concentrate on your family. We’ll take care of the office.”

“I know. Thanks, man. I’ll call you.”

Donovan said his goodbyes, trekked back to the elevator and rode the four floors down. He rounded the corner and crossed the lobby, noting that the front desk was now empty. As he reached the entrance he saw a sign indicating he would have to exit through Emergency. Changing directions, he shoved his hands in his pockets and started toward the other exit. His mind went back to his goddaughter. He hadn't expected the riot of emotions that swirled in his gut when he held Nadia. As hard as he tried to keep the distant memories from surfacing, they came anyway. He inhaled deeply and forced them down. Out of the corner of his eye, movement caught his attention, interrupting his thoughts. Then he heard a woman's startled cry. Donovan took off at a dead run.

He caught the falling woman around the waist with one arm and helped the other person steady the tumbling coffee cart with his free hand. He registered the searing pain as his arm snagged the edge of the cart and hot coffee spilled over his forearm.

"Oh, my goodness! I'm so sorry." The young woman pushing the cart snatched up the remaining carafes, trying to keep them from falling to the floor with the other two.

Donovan jerked his arm back and grimaced. "It's okay."

She rushed off and pushed through the door into what he assumed was the ladies room.

He turned to the woman in his embrace. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, but her trembling body told a different story. He instinctively pulled her closer. "It's okay. You're safe now." She released a deep sigh and moved closer, burying her head in his chest. The way she clung to him stirred something deep inside him. *I was just keeping her from being knocked down*, he quickly told himself.

"I guess I wasn't watching where I was going," she finally said.

Adrenaline still pumped through his veins, his heart hadn't returned to a normal pace and the pain in his arm was increasing. Yet, none of it erased the strange feelings evoked by holding this woman in his arms. Pushing them aside, he rationalized that they were probably due to the excitement of the evening—the birth of his first godchild—and pure exhaustion. Nothing more.