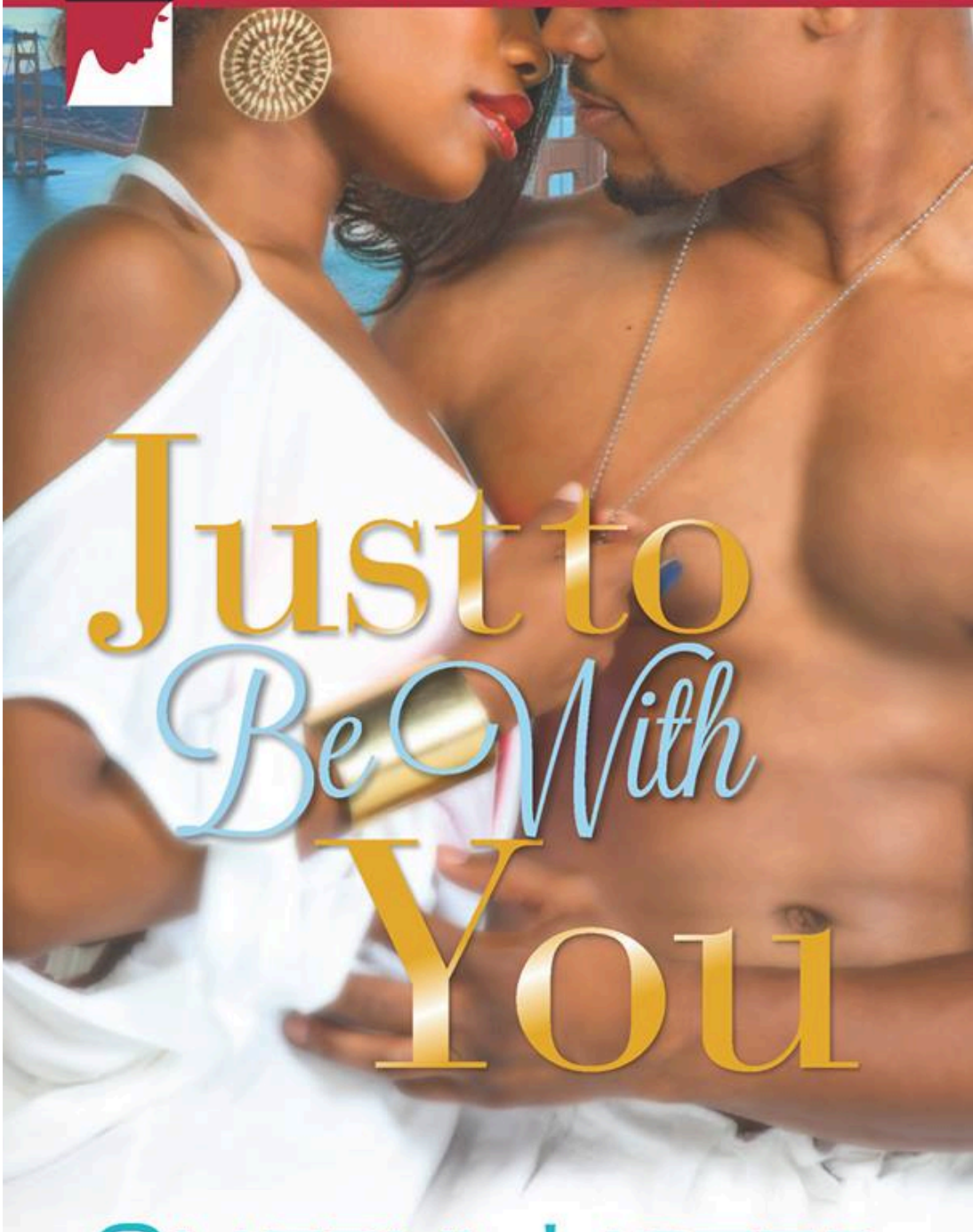


K I M A N I R O M A N C E



Just to  
Be With  
YOU

SHERYL LISTER

## Chapter 1

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into this,” Janae Simms muttered.

“Oh, please.” Her friend, Karen Morris, waved her off. “You can’t tell me you’re not a little bit excited about seeing Monte in concert?”

She sighed. “His music is nice, but you’re the one who has all of his CDs. And, I don’t know why, if the concert is tonight, we need to spend the entire weekend in San Francisco. Seems like you should have brought your boyfriend instead of me.”

“Andre is working and it’s not like you have anything else to do.”

“I have a ton of lesson plans to do.”

“So do I, but you need to see outside sometimes—and I mean someplace other than that elementary school playground. Now, repeat after me. I’m going to have a good time.”

Janae rolled her eyes. She turned back to see Karen still waiting. “Fine. I’m going to have a good time,” she grumbled. They continued walking towards the jazz club.

Karen shook her head and laughed. “Girl, we’re going to have a ball.”

“Where are we sitting?”

Karen wiggled her eyebrows. “You’ll see.”

They passed a line of people waiting to enter and went inside. “Shouldn’t we get in line, Karen?”

“No. Our tickets are for reserved seating. That line is for those with general seating tickets. I wanted us to get a *real* good seat.”

She waited while Karen gave her name to the attendant at the ‘will call’ desk. He located and handed her their tickets. Janae had only been to the jazz club once, but liked the intimate feeling. The floor level featured three rows of tables for four, while the upper levels had a choice of tables or booths. Even the balcony seating offered great views. There wasn’t a bad seat in the house.

“Enjoy the show,” he said.

When they entered the seating area, Janae stopped short, surprised to see that they had floor seats in the second row, dead center. No more than ten feet separated them from the stage. “Um, Karen, these seats are kind of close to the stage, don’t you think?”

“Of, course. Girl, I want to be close enough to that fine man to see his sweat. Monte is a walking chocolate fantasy.”

She chuckled at the description, but Karen did have a point. Monte would be an excellent fantasy man, which is where she decided men belonged. In fantasies, hearts didn’t get broken—something she would never let happen to her again.

Janae scanned the crowded room. Efficient staff moved through throngs of people serving food and drinks, as music poured through hidden speakers, and animated chatter filled the air. The lights went down, and as soon as he hit the stage, Monte’s voice immediately

captivated her. Whether one of his sexy ballads or an up-tempo number like the current song, the man's smooth baritone stirred something deep within her. She closed her eyes, nodding in time with the beat as he sang song after song.

Karen tapped her excitedly. "He's getting ready to come down into the audience."

"What?" Janae's eyes snapped open. She glanced up in time to see Monte exit the stage through a door on the left side and watched as women stood from their tables and tried to gyrate their bodies against his when he passed. He smiled and shook some hands, but didn't linger. As he neared their table, Karen pulled Janae up from the chair.

"Here he comes." Karen stretched out her hand then screamed when he reached out to touch it.

Since Karen held on to her arm, Janae couldn't sit; but hoped the sexy singer would keep going.

*Nope, no such luck.* Instead, he actually stopped in front of her, reached down to bring her hand to his lips. The moment he touched her, electric shocks shot up her arm and through her body. Her gaze flew to his and she snatched her hand back. His eyes widened. She thought she saw surprise cross his features, but it was gone so fast, she might have imagined it. She glanced around to see if anyone had noticed what happened, but Karen was still swooning. As for the other couple at their table, the guy was too busy trying to pull his screaming date back down into the chair to notice her. Janae dropped into the chair then stared down at her still tingling hand. Clenching her fist, she willed the sensations to stop.

Maybe she was crazy. Maybe she only imagined the spark. Right? She chanced a glimpse in his direction as he walked back toward the stage door and, as if he sensed her perusal, he stopped to glance over his shoulder. His eyes locked with hers for a brief moment and something

unnamed passed between them. Something within his dark, magnetic gaze pulled her in and wouldn't let go. She shook her head to clear it, but couldn't resist another peek. He stopped to talk to someone for a moment, nodded in her direction then climbed back on the stage.

He sang another song, a beautiful ballad about a love worth waiting for. Although she enjoyed the lyrics, she knew only few people were fortunate enough to find that kind of love. As soon as the last note faded away, the man she'd seen Monte talking to came out onto the stage.

"Is everybody enjoying the show so far?" Thunderous applause and screams followed. He waited a few seconds before continuing. "Tonight, we have a special treat. At the conclusion of the show, two of you will be invited backstage to meet the band and get autographs and pictures with Monte." More shouts followed, as did a drum roll. He shook the bag in his hand then pulled out a slip of paper. "The lucky winners are seated at table fourteen, seats C and D. At the end of the show, please proceed to the door at the left of the stage and present your ticket stubs."

Karen screamed again. Janae thought she'd really gone around the bend this time.

"Janae, did you hear that? Two people are going backstage after the show."

"Yeah, okay. Calm down. People are staring," Janae whispered, glancing around.

"Girl, didn't you hear the table and seats?" She took the ticket stub out of her purse.

"Look. *We're* the ones going backstage."

Janae gasped sharply, whipped her head around to find Monte's eyes waiting. A slight grin curved his mouth. She arched an eyebrow. By the time the concert ended, she was a nervous wreck. Her palms had dampened and her heart thundered in her chest. How in the world could she get through another encounter with him? Never had she felt such sensations from a simple touch in her entire life. Karen, on the other hand, couldn't stop bouncing in her seat.

“Ooh, I can’t wait to be up close and personal with Monte. Rich milk chocolate skin, dark brown eyes that seem like they can see clear to your soul, sexy, full lips framed by that goatee. And let’s not forget that X-rated body—over six feet of rock...hard...muscle. Can you imagine what it would feel like to run your hands all over that body?”

“Um, Karen, what about Andre? You know, your *boyfriend*.”

Karen waved a dismissive hand. “Let’s go. The crowd is emptying out.”

Janae sighed, but followed her to the side door where the same man who made the announcement greeted them.

He checked their ticket stubs then smiled. “Please, come in. My name is Donovan Wright.” He shook their hands then gestured them up the steps where he introduced them to the band members and, finally, to Monte.

Following Karen’s lead, Janae politely shook each of their hands, but when it came time to shake Monte’s hand, she hesitated. *Go ahead girl and shake the man’s hand. It was probably just a fluke*, she chastised herself. As soon as their hands touched, she felt it again. She tried to pull her hand back, but he tightened his grip.

The way he stared at her confirmed that, one, she hadn’t imagined the electricity between them, and two, he felt it, also—it was as real as the man standing in front of her.

“It’s nice to meet you, Miss?”

“Simms. Janae Simms,” she answered softly.

“Janae. I like that.” He gestured to two chairs. “Why don’t you ladies have a seat?”

The band members drifted out to the restaurant area until only Donovan remained. “I’m going to get a drink from the bar. Can I get you ladies something?” he asked.

Janae declined.

“Actually, I have to go to the ladies room, so I’ll follow you out. Be right back, Janae,” Karen said.

Janae noted the amusement on her friend’s face. Her eyes offered a silent plea, but Karen merely smiled then sailed out behind Donovan. Her gaze swept over the small space crowded with instruments, cases and wires. When she turned back, Monte sat studying her as if he were trying to figure something out.

He leaned back in his chair, stroked his goatee and stared at her so long she became uncomfortable. She shifted in her seat. “Do you do this often?”

He continued to stare.

“Maybe I should be flattered or something, but I’m not some groupie.” She stood, adding softly, “This was a bad idea. I think I should go.”

He jumped up from his chair. “Wait,” he said, coming to stand in front of her. “No, I don’t.”

“Excuse me?”

“You asked if I do this often. I’m assuming you meant invite women backstage. The answer is no. In fact, I’ve never, *ever* done this before.”

“As popular as you are, you really expect me to believe that?”

“Honestly. I’ve never liked the groupie scene, so no one has ever been allowed back here in all the eight years I’ve been touring. We do all of the signings in the lobby.”

“Why now?”

He covered her hand with his. She immediately felt the warmth again.

“This is why.”

Janae gasped softly, her hand trembling in his. Why did this happen now and with this particular man? She tried to get her hand back but, like the other time, he wouldn't let go.

“You feel this don't you?”

“No...I...yes.” Janae gently extricated her hand from his then took several steps backward. Being close to him short-circuited her brain and she needed to think. Hadn't she decided that men were only good for fantasies? He would definitely fit right in...okay he would *top* the fantasy list. But that was all this could be—a really, *really* nice fantasy. No way would she allow herself to get caught up in a man like him who probably had women by the dozen. Besides, as a teacher, the last thing she needed was a parent seeing her face splashed across a tabloid under some crazy heading like, “Teacher Caught in Threesome with Popular Music Star.”

He closed the distance between them. “Janae?”

When she glanced up at him, something flashed in his eyes and, before she could blink, he covered her mouth in an explosive kiss that stole her breath and weakened her knees. She was totally unprepared for the feel of his mouth on hers. The kiss was gentle, but infused with a passion and need she didn't understand. Suddenly, a longing she'd never experienced took over her body. She pulled away sharply. “I...I have to...go.”

“No, don't go.” He scrubbed a hand down his face. “I'm sorry. Please. Stay.”

She eyed him warily and clutched her chest, trying to control her runaway heart.

“Please. I just want to talk. Sit down, okay?”

Janae sat. He wisely took the chair farthest from her. She kept making furtive glances toward the door, hoping to see Karen so they could leave. An awkward silence settled over the room.



He cleared his throat. “So, Ms. Simms, I couldn’t help but notice your necklace. An apple? It’s very unique.”

“It was a gift from one of my students. I teach an elementary special education class,” she answered with a nervous smile.

“That must be challenging. What grade?”

“Fourth and fifth grades, and yes, it can be very challenging, but I love it.”

“Do you live here in San Francisco?”

“No, about an hour and a half away in San Jose. Where do you live?”

“Los Angeles.”

Before he could ask her another question, Karen returned with Donovan trailing behind her. *Finally.*

“Did you get your CD autographed yet, Janae?” Karen asked, reclaiming her seat.

“We hadn’t gotten around to that yet,” Monte answered. “Janae told me about her teaching. Do you teach, Ms. Morris?” He accepted the cup of tea from Donovan. “Thanks.”

“Yes, fourth grade. We teach at the same school.”

Janae retrieved the CD booklet from one of Monte’s projects out of her purse. “It’s getting late, Karen. We should let Monte sign our CDs and leave. I’m sure he’s tired.” She held out the booklet.

Monte took the booklet, smiling knowingly. “Ms. Simms mentioned you live in San Jose. Are you ladies driving back tonight?”

“Goodness, no,” Karen said. “We’re staying the entire weekend.”

“Any big plans?” he asked after taking a sip of his tea.

“Nothing really big,” Karen said. “We’ll hit Ghirardelli Square, Pier 39, and maybe do one of the sunset cruises.

Janae listened as Karen excitedly shared their plans. Monte smiled between sips of his tea.

“Sounds like a good time,” he said. “I’ve been to San Francisco several times, but never stayed here long enough to go sightseeing. A sunset cruise might be fun.”

“Don’t you have another show tomorrow?” Janae asked. She needed to get away from this man—fast—and didn’t want him getting any ideas.

A slow grin made its way across his face. “As a matter of fact, that was my last show for the next three weeks. I’m due for a little R&R.” He set his cup down. “I have a great idea. Would you ladies like some company tomorrow? Donovan and I would love to explore the city with you...that is, if your significant others don’t mind.”

“Hey, that sounds great,” Karen said. “That’s definitely not a problem for me.”

Monte stared intently at Janae. “What about your boyfriend, Ms. Simms?”

“I don’t have a boyfriend,” she answered, holding his gaze.

“Great. What time should we meet? We can come to your hotel.” When they finished making plans, Monte reached in his bag and pulled out a pen. “Let me sign your CDs so you can get going. It’s getting pretty late.”

Janae hopped up. “I agree.” He signed the one she’d brought and she stuck it back in her purse.

Karen whipped out the booklets for all six CDs.

Janae rolled her eyes. Monte laughed as he signed each one.

“What? If I’m going to see the man, I might as well get them all signed,” Karen said with her hands planted on her hips.

“It’s okay. I don’t mind.” Monte handed them back.

“Don’t we get pictures, too?” Karen asked, holding up her phone.

Janae groaned inwardly.

“Most definitely. Donovan, would you please do the honors?”

“Sure.” Donovan took the phone. “Ms. Simms, would you like to give me your phone or camera?”

Janae handed her phone to him reluctantly.

“All right. I’ll take one of you both with Monte on each phone then take an individual shot on your respective phones. Will that work?”

They nodded then went to stand next to Monte. Janae pasted a smile on her face, hoping it looked genuine. She was fine until it came time for her to take a picture with Monte alone, especially when he moved his body closer to her and tossed his own phone to Donovan.

“Ooh, this is going to be a good one, girl,” Karen cooed, snapping the picture on her phone.

Once they finished taking pictures, Monte and Donovan insisted on walking them to their car. Monte stood so close to her while walking, Janae could feel the heat emanating from his body. She quickened her strides. When they finally reached the car, she promptly got in, released a shaky breath then gave a tiny wave as they backed out of the lot.

“All right, girl. You’ve got some ’splainin to do,” Karen said as she drove them to the hotel.

“What’re you talking about?”

“Please don’t insult my intelligence. I want to know what’s going on between you and Mr. Chocolate Fantasy. And don’t say it’s nothing. I saw the way he looked at you. Why do you think I tried to give you two a minute?”

“I don’t know, but whatever game he’s interested in playing, I’ll pass. Besides, I’ve sworn off men. He’s a millionaire music mogul and can have any woman he wants. What could he possibly see in a schoolteacher? I hope he doesn’t think I’m some little groupie he can have a weekend fling with and then go about his merry way.” Janae frowned. “And then you had to go and invite him to spend tomorrow with us.”

“Sorry, but I wasn’t passing up what might be my only chance to hang out with someone who’s famous. And why couldn’t he be attracted to a schoolteacher? Contrary to what you believe, I don’t think he sees you as a groupie. As a matter of fact, from everything I’ve read about him or seen, he doesn’t really do the whole groupie scene. He’s never been linked to any scandals, baby mama drama or anything. Besides, it’s time for you to come out of hiding. Not all men are jerks like Carter and Lawrence.”

“I know that,” she snapped.

“Good. Then give Monte a chance.” She shrugged. “If he acts like a jerk, we can toss him off the Golden Gate Bridge.”

“You’re a mess. What would I do without you?”

“Possibly miss your love connection.”

Janae grunted. “Whatever.”

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As soon as the car pulled off, Donovan rounded on him. “Okay, Terrence, what the hell is going on with you? It’s a good thing no one asked to look in that bag. It would’ve been hard to explain why there was only one ticket.”

Although Donovan was one of the few people close enough to call him by his first name, he only did so when they were alone. Terrence ‘Monte’ Campbell ran a hand over his close-cropped curly hair and blew out a harsh breath. “I wish I knew, Don.”

“If this is some booty call, you don’t need to spend the entire day with her.”

“It’s not like that, Donovan,” he said through clenched teeth. He pivoted on his heel then stalked off.

Donovan quickly caught up. “Look, I’m sorry. If you say it’s not like that then I believe you. But you’ve never done anything like this before. What happened tonight?”

“I don’t know. When I touched her hand...it was weird...I felt...I don’t know...*something*.”

Donovan clapped him on the shoulder. “It’s called awareness, a connection, sexual chemistry, or all of the above.”

“That’s the thing. It’s not sexual, not entirely.” For a man who made a living expressing himself through words, Terrence struggled to find them tonight.

“You don’t have to explain, Terrence. I know what you mean and it’s about time.”

“About time for what?”

“For you to find true love.”

“No. That’s not an option. It’s *never* gonna happen.” Only one woman had walked out of his life and he vowed no other woman would ever cause him that type of pain again.

“If what you’re saying is true, then you need to cancel tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“That little lady doesn’t look like the type who’s into head games. You shouldn’t start something you don’t plan to finish.”

“I have to see her again,” he said absently.

“I know that,” Donovan said softly. “I can see that she’s gotten to you, so there must be something special about her. Do you really want to punish her for something she had nothing to do with?”

“What does that mean?”

“You know how you are—one date and it’s done.”

Terrence scowled over at him, not happy about the insinuation regarding his dating life. Women knew the score up front.

“Take my advice, man. Spend time with her tomorrow and see where it goes. You can’t keep your heart closed off forever.” He clapped him on the shoulder. “Come on. Let’s get packed up so we can get to the hotel. The band’s waiting.”

Terrence nodded. He’d never felt so conflicted in his life. On one hand, Donovan was right and he should at least give it a chance, but on the other, he didn’t know if he was capable of giving or accepting love.

Later, he stood out on the hotel room’s balcony thinking about Janae, still stunned by his reaction to her. He’d felt the current and, when their eyes connected, his gut clenched. In eight years of touring, nothing like this had ever happened—and he’d touched *millions* of women. Sure he’d experienced moments of lust, but nothing like what happened tonight. It had been difficult to reign in his thoughts and focus on finishing the concert.

This overwhelming need for a woman was foreign to him. He dated when it suited him. Occasionally things progressed to where they'd sleep together, but that's where it ended. He kept things strictly physical; his emotions did not come into play. What about this particular woman knocked him off balance? When she asked "why her" he debated the best way to explain it to her, but had a hard time, mainly because he couldn't explain it to himself. Even now, he could still feel the spark of awareness that coursed through him when he touched her hand.

Okay, she was a beauty, with a petite body of a goddess, skin the color of melted caramel, expressive brown eyes, high cheekbones and a pair of lips that made him want to taste them—which he was unable to stop himself from doing. When he kissed her, the tightening in his chest and the range of emotions that flooded his body had shocked him. Thinking back, he'd probably scared her to death. Hell, he'd scared himself. He had no idea what possessed him to kiss her, but now that he had, her taste would haunt him for the rest of his life.

He'd shoved his hands in his pockets when walking her to the car to keep from pulling her in his arms for another kiss. He had no clue how to stop the rampant desire or confusing emotions spreading through his body. By spending tomorrow with Janae, he intended to figure it out.