



Blurb

They have nothing in common. So why can't they stay away from each other?

Construction foreman Tomas Molina has no desire to settle down. He enjoys the single life too much, with all the choices of women available to him. But when ad executive Talia Jackson becomes single again, they start an affair that has him questioning his beliefs about relationships. And the next thing he knows, he's the one demanding exclusivity.

Talia Jackson has always done what's right. Gone to the right schools, worn the right clothes, and married the right man. Seeking a boost when her marriage ends in divorce, she finds comfort in the arms of Tomas Molina, a man who makes her feel alive in a way she never has before. Then an unexpected result of their affair forces her to make a tough decision—stay in the world she's known all her life, or make a future with the man she's grown to love.

The Wrong Man

by Delaney Diamond

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Chapter One

Talia Jackson had been summoned, and she didn't know why. She rarely made the drive from her condo in Atlanta to this sprawling estate north of the city because she hated coming here. Hopefully the visit wouldn't take long. She had a housewarming to attend.

She parked in the circular driveway of Livingstone Manor, the name she'd given to her grandmother's outrageously large home, because house didn't provide a good enough description and even mansion was an inadequate word.

Constructed in Greek Revival style with columns along the front, the manor sat in the middle of a fifteen-acre property that rivaled the grandeur of the governor's mansion. Twenty-five foot tall American Holly trees flanked either side, and during the holidays, her grandmother paid an exorbitant sum to a tree decorating service to have the trees trimmed and topped with a star. The verdant grass of the expansive lawn resembled a tightly-woven carpet, and a team of gardeners ensured it never grew longer than one and a half inches or her grandmother would be livid and there would be hell to pay.

Before getting out of the car, Talia checked her makeup in the rearview mirror and smoothed her long black hair. The cream pants suit might be too formal for a weekend visit elsewhere, but with her grandmother a stickler for appearances, it was imperative she look her best. Taking one last, deep breath in preparation of the meeting, she wiped her clammy hands on a tissue and exited the car.

The butler answered the door, a somber-faced black man dressed in a uniform complete with white gloves. "Hello, Miss Talia. Miss Maybeth is in the parlor." Her heels clicked on the Italian marble floor as she followed him through the grand foyer to where her grandmother waited.

Maybeth Livingstone barely acknowledged Talia's presence, her gaze flicking over Talia's attire and, apparently finding it acceptable, turned her back to her. She paced in front of the window, a phone to her ear and her voice icy and disdainful. Talia sympathized with the person on the other end because the cutting tone was all too familiar.

Maybeth gave the receiver an earful about a mistake they'd made with a package of documents that should have arrived in her Midtown law office but had been delivered to the Florida office instead. Per usual, she spoke so properly her voice carried a hint of a British accent even though she'd been born and raised in Georgia.

She wore a print skirt and light-colored silk blouse that undoubtedly cost an obscene amount of money. The only jewelry on her body were two Harry Winston diamond drop earrings and a rose-gold Patek Philippe watch—one of several she owned. At sixty-plus-years-old, she had the energy of a woman in her twenties and the facial features of a woman in her forties. Her gray hair was elegantly styled in a bob, flipped up at the ends and contrasting beautifully with the inky blue-black color of her skin.

“You and Carter are divorced.”

Talia blinked. She hadn’t noticed her grandmother had finished the call. Maybeth never beat around the bush, but how could she have possibly known about the divorce? Talia hadn’t told her about her most recent failure.

“Don’t concern yourself about how I found out,” Maybeth said in her imperious tone. She set the phone on the table. “What’s disturbing is that you didn’t tell me yourself. I don’t believe he was the best choice, but he’s as good a man as you could possibly find, and you were married for ten years. I expected the marriage to last, Talia. What did you do?”

Talia’s chest hitched with pain. *I didn’t do anything.*

The systematic tearing down had begun and she lowered her eyes to her lap, blinking back tears she couldn’t allow to fall. If she did, her grandmother would rip her apart. Maybeth despised weakness.

“We grew apart. It happens.” She hated the meek sound of her voice.

Why could she stand up to everyone but her grandmother? Because she craved her approval, longed for it more than anything else. Maybeth was the only mother she’d ever known, but she couldn’t recall her grandmother ever paying her a genuine compliment or celebrating an accomplishment without pointing out the next rung on the ladder to climb.

“What are your plans now?” Maybeth’s sharp voice intruded on her thoughts.

“Plans?” Talia lifted her gaze.

“Don’t repeat what I say, Talia. It makes you look foolish. Yes, your plans. You’ve accomplished the goal of senior VP, now what’s next? Without a husband and children keeping you back, the sky’s the limit. You could run Omega Advertising if you wanted to, but I don’t know if you have the drive.”

“I-I...um—”

“Stop stuttering and speak up,” Maybeth snapped.

Talia took a deep breath. She clenched her trembling fingers together on her lap and tried to imagine sitting in front of someone else—someone less intimidating who didn't make her feel like an insignificant little pea. "The Santorinis are not going to let an outsider run the firm. It's a family business," she explained. Her grandmother knew that but obviously didn't see it as an insurmountable obstacle.

"You impress them enough and they will." Maybeth's eagle-eye gaze narrowed on Talia. She pursed her lips and shook her head as if she saw something that disappointed her. "It's up to you, but you always limit yourself. You haven't lived up to your full potential and I don't know why. Well, I know why. Too much Jackson blood and not enough Livingstone blood. I swear your mother must be rolling over in her grave wondering why you won't do better when she gave her life so you could have yours."

Talia flinched internally at the brutal assessment. Maybeth always made remarks like that, reminding her of why she didn't have a mother.

"She could have been anything she wanted," her grandmother said often. Instead, she'd "fallen in"—again, her grandmother's words—with Talia's father, gotten pregnant, and lost her life during childbirth.

Maybeth sat down on the sofa across from Talia, her back straight like a queen on a throne observing one of her subjects. She picked up a John Grisham hardcover from the table in front of her, flipped it open, and began to read.

"Next time keep me informed," she said to the pages. "I don't like finding out these things second hand."

And with that, Talia was dismissed from the queen's court.

Chapter Two

Drained. That's how Talia felt after interactions with Maybeth. Drained of energy. Drained of life.

She pulled out from the onramp and back onto the highway. She took a deep breath, then another, and kept to the far right lane—the slow lane—while she regrouped.

She practiced her smile and spoke her mantra out loud. “I’m strong, capable, and independent.”

Her hands still shook, but slowly her pulse rate returned to normal. She resisted the urge to press the accelerator to the floor, anxious to get to the party where familiar faces and welcoming smiles would be the perfect antidote to the battering her self-esteem had taken.

Thirty minutes later she turned onto the cul-de-sac where her best friend and her husband were having a party to celebrate the move to their new home. She pulled her car as close to the house as she could. She left her suit jacket in the car and strode the short distance to the house, past all the vehicles lining the street.

Welcome.

The white banner with red letters stretched above the doorway of the two-story Neocolonial house nestled between two other homes on the quiet street. Balloons tied to the mailbox marked “Stewart” waved in a gentle breeze and made it easy for guests to find the location of the party.

Inside the house was as busy as an ants’ nest with people milling around carrying drinks and plates piled high with food. Several smiled politely at her, and she smiled back but didn’t recognize any faces. A little boy zipped by and Talia hopped out of the way. His mother followed close behind, muttering an apology as she tried to catch up to him.

In the living room, gift baskets and boxes wrapped in bright-colored ribbons and pastel paper covered the middle of the floor. Embarrassed she’d only bought a gift card, Talia glanced around to make sure no one saw her drop it on the pile. She’d been so busy juggling projects at work and moving into her new place, she hadn’t had time to shop for a housewarming present. But her friends, Ryan and Shawna Stewart, would understand. Most people preferred gift cards nowadays anyway, didn’t they? Then they could get what they really wanted.

At the back of the house, she entered the large kitchen with its pine cabinets and marble countertops. More people hovered in there and food covered almost every visible surface. The

tempting aroma of grilled meat, cooked greens, and a host of other food items teased her appetite and made her salivate.

“Hey, you made it!” Yvonne Wallace, Shawna’s older sister, walked up holding her two-year-old daughter.

Happy to see a familiar face, Talia smiled in relief. Her gaze took in the little girl sucking her thumb, head nestled against her mother’s breasts. How many children did Yvonne have now? Talia had lost count.

The two women embraced.

“This is quite a spread,” Talia remarked, looking around.

Yvonne nodded. “They gave up on the idea of finger food and figured they’d feed everyone a real meal.”

“This is more than a meal. It’s a banquet.”

She took a quick peek under covered containers and found chicken prepared at least three ways, barbecued ribs, rice, and different types of casseroles.

“The heavy food’s in here,” Yvonne explained. “One of Ryan’s friends is manning the grill and we should have hotdogs and hamburgers to add soon.”

“Did they think they were feeding an army?” Talia turned and spotted a table filled with pies, cakes, and brownies. She couldn’t wait to sink her teeth into the offerings, and her stomach grumbled as a reminder that she’d only had a smoothie for breakfast and nothing else all day.

“I know, right.” Yvonne shifted her daughter higher on her hip. “Ryan and Shawna are in the back yard. If you want, I can give you the grand tour of the house before you head out there.”

“Let me get something to eat and I’ll find you when I’m ready. Thanks.”

“If you need anything, holler. I’m supposed to be one of the hostesses, but I’ve been doing a crappy job.” Yvonne laughed to herself and meandered off.

Talia glanced out the wide windows of the French doors. More people stood around chatting and eating in the big yard. A wooden fence followed the perimeter of the property, providing privacy from the neighbors on either side. A burly guy with a beard and apron worked the large stainless steel grill, carefully placing cooked meat into an aluminum pan. William, Yvonne’s husband, sat at a table with Ryan and Shawna.

Ryan, a good-looking man with dark hair and intense blue eyes, and Shawna, always with a ready smile on her smooth, brown face, had been married almost three years. They lingered in the

honeymoon phase, forever staring at each other with puppy-dog eyes, as if no one else existed in the world but the two of them.

Their twenty-month-old son, Ryker, so named because all the men in his father's family had a name that began with the letter "R," ran around on the neat lawn with a couple of other kids. With his curly hair and light brown skin resembling an even, all-over tan, he represented a blend of both parents' complexions and features.

The most recent addition to their small family lay cradled in Shawna's arms—ten-month-old Madison, feeding herself from a bottle. She chugged away, all the while staring intently up at her mother, giving the impression she understood what Shawna was saying.

Shawna's ponytail swung from side to side as she laughed and shook her head against whatever Ryan had said, before punching him lightly in the shoulder. He caught her hand and held onto it. Talia smiled—it was impossible not to—but watching them together made her insides twist painfully, a strong reminder of her newly single status.

The deep timbre of a man's laughter in the hall caught her attention, and she knew right away who had arrived. Oddly, her pulse jumped a little at the sound of his voice.

Sure enough, in walked Tomas Molina, six feet two inches of flirtatious male. Wearing a pair of snug fitting jeans on his long legs and a black T-shirt that stretched over his powerful chest, he already had women eyeing him as if they wanted to take a bite out of him instead of the food on their plates. Natural blonde highlights streaked through his brown hair, which always had a slightly disheveled look, giving him the appearance of someone who'd just rolled out of bed. At least today he'd pulled the unruly shoulder length locks into a decent-looking ponytail.

One woman stroked his ripped bicep, and he flexed the muscle for good measure. "*Buenos días, Tomas,*" she purred.

He flashed an open, friendly smile. "*Buenos días. ¿Estas bien?*"

"*Sí, gracias.*"

Rolling her eyes, Talia picked up a Styrofoam plate and began to spoon potato salad onto it. The way women fawned all over him disgusted her, and he lapped up the attention like a true narcissist. She heard him exchange pleasantries with a few other guests while she lifted the plastic wrap on another container and added coleslaw to her plate.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Tomas stroll over with a lazy gait. "Well, well, Talia Jackson is here." He peered out the kitchen window at the sky. "No. No pigs are flying." His Spanish-accented voice, low and husky, reminded her of the actor William Levy.

She and Tomas seldom spoke, but whenever they did, he always had something smart alecky to say. She couldn't for the life of her figure out what she'd done to make him pick on her all the time. Probably because he was an arrogant chauvinist and she had no qualms about calling him on it. Fortunately she knew how to dish the witty retorts as well as he did.

"Oh look, *another* T-shirt. What a surprise."

He apparently never met a T-shirt he didn't want to own, and it seemed his entire wardrobe consisted of them in all colors. He wore them so tight they banded around his large biceps and molded to the contours of his muscular chest.

Unfazed, he responded, "You notice what I wear? I'm flattered."

"Don't be," Talia said.

He folded his arms and leaned a hip against the counter. "I'm surprised you came."

"Why wouldn't I be here for my friends' housewarming party?"

He shrugged. "You're such a busy woman. You hardly ever hang out, and every year Shawna invites you to my picnic on Memorial Day weekend, but you never come."

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you're disappointed I don't." She lifted the aluminum foil on another container, and when she found the baked chicken, she added a leg to her plate. "Tell you what, I'll come this year so you won't feel so neglected."

"I like it better that you don't," he said.

"*Riiight*." She smirked at him and added corn on the cob to her plate.

She felt his gaze on her, and a prickling sensation crawled up the back of her neck. He had a way of looking at women as if he was undressing them with his eyes. She didn't know if he did it on purpose or not, but it made her feel stripped bare in his presence. Every time he came near, she became hyper-aware of him and a little anxious, a little...breathless. Even his voice made her feel odd. She liked the sound of his rich baritone too much, and the physiological responses she experienced at his proximity were clearly inappropriate.

"We should call a truce," he said.

"Are we at war?"

He chuckled. "You always have an answer, don't you? No, we're not at war. At least, I don't want to be. We should try being friends since our best friends are married to each other."

"That would be boring, wouldn't it, if we got along?"

"So you like fighting with me, is that it?" His eyes mirrored the question. They stood out against his swarthy skin, and she wondered how she'd never noticed how attractive they were

before. Light brown. No flecks of green or other colors, only a pure, antiqued gold like a strong whiskey.

Did she like arguing with him? Maybe she did. Their sparring matches always left her buzzing with energy afterward, and after the meeting with her grandmother, she welcomed the interaction.

“Even if I do,” she said, “you like it way more than I do. You’re always the one who gets the fights started, like you did a minute ago.”

“Only because you need it.”

“Need it?” Talia cocked an eyebrow. “You have to explain what you mean.”

“You’re one of those women who can get out of hand, so I have to keep you grounded. You have a... *cómo se dice?* Oh, I remember.” He snapped his fingers. “You have a Napoleon complex.”

She shot him her *Are-you-for-real?* look. “I don’t think so.”

“Yes, you do. It’s because you’re so short.” He sliced his hand horizontally from his nose over the top of her head. “See?”

Talia stood up straighter, as if she could grow taller by sheer will power. “I do not have a Napoleon complex, and anyway, I’m pretty sure that only applies to men.”

He looked amused. “No, I’m sure the complex applies to women, too. I have a perfect example standing right in front of me. How’s the weather down there?”

She cut her eyes at him and continued searching for food.

“No response? I’m so disappointed,” he said.

“I’m ignoring you for the rest of the day.”

“This is a first. I silenced Talia Jackson all by myself, and I didn’t need to tape her mouth. I should make an announcement.” He picked up a piece of baked chicken with his hand.

“*There are tongs.*” Talia held up a set. “What are you, a barbarian?”

“We called a truce, remember?” He bit into the chicken and winked.

She stared at him for a moment and then shook her head, laughing. He was so ridiculous. How freeing it must be to do as you please and not worry about what others think.

She noted the expression on Tomas’s face but couldn’t decipher the look.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

He took another bite of chicken and finished chewing before he answered her question. He grinned. “You should smile more.”

About the Author

Delaney Diamond is the bestselling author of sweet and sensual romance novels. Originally from the U.S. Virgin Islands, she now lives in Atlanta, Georgia. She has been an avid reader for as long as she can remember and in her spare time reads romance novels, mysteries, thrillers, and a fair amount of non-fiction.

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