

BLURB

When Carlos Hortado left Toronto and the love of his life, it was the hardest decision he'd ever made. Eventually, he learned to live with the regret and build a life for himself as an up-and-coming artist in a new city. Then one day he sees her again—and the memories of what they used to share won't leave him. He allowed her father to chase him away the first time, but now he's determined to fight for their love.

Carmen Reeves was heartbroken when Carlos left but threw herself into work and learned to live without him. She never stopped loving him, though, and when they meet again, she's willing to do whatever it takes to be with him. But Carlos might not be the man she thinks he is. Was her father right all along? If so, her heart will break all over again.

Never Again by Delaney Diamond

Copyright © January 2020, Delaney Diamond

Garden Avenue Press

Atlanta, Georgia

ISBN: 978-1-946302-12-0 (Ebook edition)

ISBN: 978-1-946302-13-7 (Paperback edition)

This book is a work of fiction. All names, characters, locations, and incidents are products of the author's imagination, or have been used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, locales, or events is entirely coincidental. No part of this e-book may be reproduced or shared by any electronic or mechanical means, including but not limited to printing, file sharing, and e-mail, without prior written permission from Delaney Diamond.

www.delaneydiamond.com

Chapter 1

“Come on! I know you have more to give. You can do this!”

Carmen grimaced as Lionel, her trainer, hovered over her at the bench press. His muscular body barely fit in the dark green unitard he wore.

Lying on her back, she gritted her teeth with the tremendous effort needed to slowly push the free weight higher.

“Don’t arch that back,” Lionel warned, his shaved head lowering to hers.

Cabrón, she cursed in her head, but she flattened her spine, determined to complete the reps in the right manner because she promised herself to do better. That’s why she’d hired a trainer. To push her past what she *thought* were her limits. She hated him nonetheless.

“One more. You got this,” he said.

Triceps burning and sweat beading on her face, Carmen lowered the barbell. She’d come this far. She couldn’t give up now.

“Last one. Come on.”

You can do this, Carmen, she told herself.

With a surge of energy and a small cry, she shoved higher.

“Hot damn! That’s it! You did it, baby!” Lionel hollered, voice filled with pride.

He lifted the weight from her grasp, and Carmen let her arms fall to the side. She closed her eyes, letting out deep breaths of fatigue but also relief. She’d done it.

Sitting up, she placed her hands on her hips.

Lionel looked at her like a proud papa. “What did I tell you, huh? Didn’t I tell you that you were underestimating yourself? You did three reps of ten that time.”

Huffing and puffing, she grinned at him. “I did it,” she whispered.

“Yeah, you did. Put it here.” He held up a hand, and she gave him a high five.

Later, after she’d showered and changed into a pair of shorts and a fitted Fit Body Gyms tank top, Carmen returned to the bench press where Lionel was setting up the weights for his next client.

“How do you feel?” he asked.

“Right now, refreshed. Maybe a little energized.”

He nodded. “That’s what we want. You might be a little sore tomorrow because we pushed you past your normal limit, but I’m really proud of what you did today.”

“Thank you. I’ll see you next week?”

“I’ll be here.”

Carmen left, waving to the woman at the front desk before she stepped outside. Her desire to get into better shape served two purposes. One, it was good for her health. Two, her family owned Fit Body Gyms, and if you were going to sell the idea of getting a beautiful body by working out, you had to look the part. At least, that’s what she believed.

“Where to, ma’am?” Franklin, her driver, asked as he swung open the back door of the platinum-white Lincoln Navigator.

She didn’t actually need a dedicated driver, but her father had insisted she bring Franklin with her. He looked more like a bodyguard than a driver. At six eight, he was a giant of a man. His skin was dark brown and his muscular body had the strength of a tank, but Carmen had never seen him in an actual fight. The intimidating scowl that could take over his face tended to scare people—whether his eyes were obscured behind a pair of reflective sunglasses or he looked you dead in the eyes.

“Back to the apartment. I have work to do.” Carmen hopped up into the back seat, and within seconds, they pulled away from the curb.

Based out of Toronto, Fit Body Gyms was the leading gym chain in Canada and years ago had expanded into the northern United States. They offered group classes for yoga, Zumba, and other exercises, personal training, a heated pool, state-of-the-art equipment, and courts where members could play sports like basketball and racquetball.

A few years ago, Carmen’s father took the company in a new direction and expanded farther south, which turned out to be a boon to their bottom line. Most recently, they moved into the Atlanta market, and Carmen had begged her father to allow her the chance to prove herself by letting her oversee the opening of their two new locations. Surprisingly, he’d agreed.

It was a test—a test to determine whether or not she could take over the company at some point. At twenty-five, she still had a long way to go before her father retired and she took the reins of the family business, but she was determined to prove her capability to him.

And why not? She had nothing else going on in her life. She was dedicated to making sure the company her parents built from nothing was a success, and one day, her younger siblings would join her at the helm.

The SUV slowed to a stop at a red light, and Carmen idly surveyed her surroundings through the window. Up ahead to the left, her gaze rested on someone she hadn’t expected to see at all, and

the world came to a standstill. She held her breath in disbelief and sat forward, eyes focused on the man standing on the sidewalk holding a yellow beverage can in his hand as he talked to a woman on the street.

If asked to describe the woman, Carmen couldn't recount a single feature because her eyes remained focused on *him*. A black muscle shirt showed off the breadth of his broad shoulders, which were achingly familiar. Was that really Carlos? Same build, same shoulder-length loose-curved hair secured at the back of his head.

He laughed, turning his head a little to the right. Yes, it was him!

The light turned green and the vehicle move forward.

Heart pounding at her ribcage, Carmen gripped the back of the driver's seat. "Franklin, wait. Pull over. Pull over, now!"

"Is something wrong?" He slid into an empty space two car lengths away and met her eyes in the rear-view mirror.

"No. Wait here." She shoved open the door.

"Miss Reeves!"

Carmen ignored him and rushed out of the vehicle, leaving the door wide open and heading back the way they'd come. Carlos had walked away, his back to her, so he didn't see her coming. She hurried, wondering how he'd react when he did see her.

That sobering thought made her slow her stride. She was a mess, with no make-up on and her short hair pulled into a haphazard ponytail. Even worse, what if he didn't want to see her?

She came to a stop about ten feet away, and with fear trembling in her heart, she took a chance. "Carlos." She spoke his name in a way that was part question.

He turned, and immediately, recognition sparked in his eyes. He frowned, black eyebrows snapping lower over dark-brown eyes that appeared black. "Carmen?" He breathed her name in disbelief.

Had his voice deepened? It wasn't fair how smooth and sensual it made every word sound, especially her name. Heat settled between her thighs and reminded her of how they'd been inseparable, how every time he came near she couldn't keep from touching him.

Her hands started to shake, and she took a calming breath and hid them behind her back.

"Yes," she replied, elated he'd immediately recognized her despite her appearance.

Carlos walked slowly forward, looking her up and down. Carlos—here, real, in the flesh. She took time to examine him, as well. His face was different—more mature and with a fine sprinkling

of hair along the jawline as if he hadn't shaved in a few days. He looked like a rock star instead of an artist, but that's what he was. An artist with a gift for capturing people and landscapes in vivid colors on canvas using only his two hands as tools, no brushes.

He wore several black and silver rings on his fingers, and his wrists were adorned with leather and beaded bracelets. The black sleeveless shirt showed off his muscular arms and made his olive-toned skin, which he'd inherited from his Chilean father and Peruvian mother—a mestiza woman of Quechua descent—appear even brighter.

“What are you doing here?” Unlike his mother, he didn't have an accent, having grown up in Toronto like Carmen after his parents emigrated from South America when he was only six years old.

“I'm here on business for my father.”

Immediately, his demeanor changed. His body tightened at the mention of the man who had never accepted him as a viable candidate for his daughter's affection.

“I...Fit Body Gyms has expanded into the Atlanta market, and I'm responsible for opening two of our new locations.”

She briefly glanced away as she spoke, embarrassed that she had taken such an interest in the company, contrary to the conversations she'd held with Carlos in the past. Angry at her father's dismissal of their relationship, she'd been adamant that she would walk away and forge her own way in life. A lot had changed in three years.

“Good for you.” His gaze lifted to a point over her shoulder. “I see you still have Franklin in tow.”

With a quick glance over her shoulder, she saw that Franklin waited and watched not too far away.

“Always.” She smiled faintly. Rubbing her hands together, she looked around the area. “You live nearby?”

Inman Park had been Atlanta's first planned suburb. By blending old Victorian homes with splashy apartments and newly built lofts, renters and homeowners lived side by side and frequented the neighborhood bars and quaint little food spots.

Carlos nodded. “Up the street a bit. I have a studio in my loft...”

As his voice trailed off, she had the distinct impression he didn't want to share any more information with her.

“Anyway, it was good seeing you,” he said.

Pain pricked her chest. That's it?

"You too." She couldn't give up. Not yet. "Maybe, if you're free some time, we could get together and catch up before I go back home."

He nodded. "That would be nice. Why don't I take your number, and I'll call you?"

Was he blowing her off?

"Sure."

"You can add it to my contacts."

He handed over his phone, and she wiped a clammy hand on her hip before entering her information. He didn't suggest she take his number, and she was uncomfortable asking since he didn't offer.

"It was good seeing you, Carmen. You look..." His gaze drifted over her again, as if taking a snapshot so he wouldn't forget. "You look amazing, as always," he whispered.

Her chest hurt. There was so much she wanted to say, but fear kept her from speaking. She wanted to catch up. She wanted to know if he'd been well. How was his mother and his siblings?

Please call.

"Thank you. It was good seeing you, too, Carlos."

"Take care."

She almost told him to make sure that he called, but she had her pride. Plus, she didn't want to push if he didn't want to get back in touch. She would let him decide.

She walked back toward the vehicle, and Franklin followed and opened the door so she could get in. They pulled away into traffic, and Carmen sat very still, hands clasped tightly in her lap.

She should be over him. She shouldn't be shaking, and the crotch of her panties shouldn't be damp simply from the sight of him.

Carmen looked over her shoulder.

Carlos was walking away. Had he looked back? Had he experienced the same magnetic pull toward her that she experienced toward him? The same desperate need to reconnect?

She kept her eyes on him until they turned the corner and then faced the front again. Her gaze collided with Franklin's in the rear-view mirror before he glanced away.

Humiliated, she could do nothing but stare out the side window because Franklin knew what she suspected to be true.

She had looked back, but Carlos had not.

Not once.

More Stories by Delaney Diamond

Royal Brides

Princess of Zamibia

Princess of Estoria

Queen of Barrakesch (coming 2020)

Quicksand

A Powerful Attraction

Without You

Never Again

Brooks Family series

A Passionate Love

Passion Rekindled

Do Over

Wild Thoughts

Two Nights in Paris

Deeper Than Love

Love Unexpected series

The Blind Date

The Wrong Man

An Unexpected Attraction

The Right Time

One of the Guys

That Time in Venice

Johnson Family series

Unforgettable

Perfect

Just Friends

The Rules

Good Behavior

Latin Men series

The Arrangement

Fight for Love

Private Acts

The Ultimate Merger

Second Chances

More Than a Mistress

Undeniable

Hot Latin Men: Vol. I (print anthology)

Hot Latin Men: Vol. II (print anthology)

Hawthorne Family series

The Temptation of a Good Man

A Hard Man to Love

Here Comes Trouble

For Better or Worse

Hawthorne Family Series: Vol. I (print anthology)

Hawthorne Family Series: Vol. II (print anthology)

Bailar series (sweet/clean romance)

Worth Waiting For

Stand Alones

Still in Love

Subordinate Position

Heartbreak in Rio

Heart's Desire

Other

[Audiobooks](#)

[Free Stories](#)