

Blurb

After three failed marriages, Renee Joseph is through with men. She just can't seem to get it right. Then things heat up with her neighbor, Clive. Will this relationship last, or is she destined to spend the rest of her life alone?

Right when Adelaide Flores is getting used to life without her ex-husband, they're thrown a curve ball that forces them together. As she and Hector handle a family crisis, the time they spend together reminds her of the good aspects of their marriage and how much she still misses him. But have they grown too far apart to make marriage work the second time around?

All her adult life, Jackie Bryant has worked to get to the point where she is. She owns three successful boutiques, but there's something missing from her life, and her happiness will depend on the tough decision she must make when her old lover, Tyson, comes back into her life.

Seasoned by Delaney Diamond

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Garden Avenue Press

Atlanta, Georgia

ISBN: 978-1-946302-23-6 (Ebook edition)

ISBN: 978-1-946302-24-3 (Paperback edition)

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Renee and Clive

Chapter 1

That darn dog was at it again.

Renee peered out the window of her home office to see her neighbor's German shepherd, Samson, barking as he chased butterflies in her yard. No fence separated her yard from next door's, only a line of bushes that roughly delineated where their property lines met. Which meant the dog often came over uninvited and unwelcomed.

Right now, Renee was working on an editing project. During the summer months when she was off from school, she took on the occasional editing job, and this one was for a former student, a well-known literary author who not only wanted her to edit the book but give her unfiltered opinion as a reader. How could she concentrate on the prose with that dog yelping and running back and forth in front of the window?

Fuming, Renee stood and marched out of the little ranch house and slammed the door.

Samson looked at her, tongue hanging out and tail wagging. She didn't understand why the dog liked her. She was never friendly to it and always took him right back to his owner. Clive Stevenson was the irritating dog owner who'd moved in a year ago and been on her nerves ever since.

If it wasn't the dog coming into her yard, it was the visual mess of car parts strewn all over his lawn and driveway as he worked on his daughter's car, his truck, or the vehicle of one of his many friends who came over to use his services. She'd written eight letters of complaint to the HOA board about his various infractions, and after the last complaint, she hadn't seen any more car repairs in the front of his house.

The nighttime parties hadn't stopped, though. They consisted of a bunch of men drinking, and talking loud as hell late at night, while their cars sat on both sides of the street and made it almost impossible to pass.

Renee took the German shepherd by its leather collar and walked stiffly across the neighbor's yard and onto his driveway where he had a white Dodge pickup parked. The white vehicle was about twenty years old with chipped paint but brand-new tires and a new interior made of supple-looking brown leather. He probably didn't want to get rid of it for sentimental reasons. Her third husband had owned a similar love—an old Mustang he poured thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours into.

More time than he did our marriage, that was for sure, Renee thought bitterly.

In contrast to the old truck, the house was in pristine condition with fresh paint and not a single piece of rotted siding in sight. Mr. Stevenson used to own a small construction company and now worked as a handyman doing odd jobs for some of the neighbors. Renee had barely talked to the annoying man, but she knew a lot about him, thanks to neighborhood gossip.

He was single, kinda-sorta good-looking—if you liked the type of man who was a little rough-looking, unrefined—and the women in Summer Springs couldn't stop talking about him. Of course, they didn't have to deal with his damn dog disturbing their peace and quiet every few days.

Renee rang the doorbell and waited. A few minutes later, Stevenson's granddaughter, Margie, opened the door—an adorable eight-year-old with raven hair styled in pigtail braids.

Her gaze dropped to the dog. “Uh-oh,” she whispered, eyes wide.

“Hello, sweetie. Is your grandfather here?” Renee asked as kindly as she could between gritted teeth.

“I'll go get him.” Margie ran off, leaving the door open and yelling, “Grandpa, Miss Grumpy is at the door!”

Renee's fake smile fell away and she stiffened. Miss Grumpy? It wasn't her fault she had to keep coming over to bring back their pet.

She heard a muffled conversation in a back room and then Clive ambled to the front door. The moment she saw him, her stomach did a peculiar flip, and her irritation amped up.

Okay, so maybe Clive Stevenson wasn't kinda-sorta good-looking. He was full-on, breathtakingly handsome by anyone's standards. His hair and beard were almost completely white, but his eyebrows and mustache dark, and his tanned skin proclaimed a penchant for working in the elements often. Handsome, yes, but not her type, so she couldn't understand why her belly always did that odd motion at the sight of him. She tended to prefer well-dressed men, suit-and-tie types. This guy was built for manual labor in a pair of worn jeans and a loose-fitting white T-shirt that showed off his barrel-like chest and tattooed arms.

“Damn, did he get over in your yard again?”

His smooth, smoky voice—annoyingly seductive—kept the women in the neighborhood giggling behind their hands and batting their eyelashes. She'd literally seen them do it.

“What do you think?” Renee released the dog's collar and he ran inside the house, his paws tapping on the hardwood floors.

“Sorry about that.”

“Are you really? Because if you were, you'd keep him in your yard. To be clear, that's my

yard, and this is yours. Keep him tied up. Something. It's dangerous to have him running around. He could get hit by a car or bite someone, and then what? Tie. Him. Up."

Clive sighed and looked past her and up at the sky. "The day is too pretty to argue with you. Anything else?"

"You are very rude."

"So you've told me," he drawled.

His green eyes lowered to hers and caused a wave of heat in her stomach. His eyes weren't just green, they were brilliant. Everything about this man was in-your-face. His devil-may-care attitude, the blatant masculinity in his casual clothes and muscular build, the deep voice that made you want to lean in and bask in the sound, and his eyes—as luminous and as dark as emeralds.

"One of these days I'm going to call animal control and have him picked up."

"You've told me that, too."

"It's not an empty threat."

"Okay." He flashed a grin, which annoyed the hell out of her. "Anything else?"

To make sure he understood she wasn't bluffing, Renee said, "Next time I'm calling animal control."

"You would deprive my granddaughter of her pet?"

"No, that's what you're doing. Keep Samson in your yard. This is your final warning." Renee stalked away.

"Have a good day!" Clive called cheerily after her.

Renee knew he was purposely trying to irritate her, yet she spun in the driveway to look at him. He was tall and the loose-fitting jeans hung low on his hips. She'd seen him shirtless plenty of times, washing his truck or his daughter's car, mowing the lawn or working on some do-it-yourself project in the back yard. Curly hairs sprinkled his chest—some of them already turned gray—as sweat trickled down his tanned skin while he worked.

She'd never met a man who aggravated her more. She'd never met a man who turned her on more. But she was self-aware enough to acknowledge that part of her aggravation stemmed from her attraction to him.

Narrowing her eyes, Renee tossed around a number of tart comments in her head to throw his way but didn't bother. He wasn't worth the effort and she wouldn't give him any more satisfaction in knowing how much he irritated her.

She stepped hard across the grass and once inside her house, slammed the front door shut.

Clive strolled to the back of the house where the kitchen opened into the den. His granddaughter was lying on the floor, coloring, with Samson right beside her keeping her company.

Margie looked up when he walked into the kitchen. “Grandpa, is Miss Grumpy mad again?” she asked.

Clive grimaced. She must have heard him call her that name when he was talking to his daughter. He’d have to be more careful in the future.

“Maybe a little annoyed. We gotta be careful about keeping Samson in our yard, okay?”

“Okay.”

“And no more calling her Miss Grumpy because that’s not her name. Her name is Miss Joseph.”

“Okay.” Margie went back to coloring.

Miss Joseph was sexy as sin but bitter as a lemon peel, and an annoying complication in his life. She was always mad, and she’d been that way long before the problems with the dog. According to the neighborhood gossip, she was a divorcee who’d owned the ranch house for decades and kept it rented for years, finally moving in permanently four years ago. A few of the neighbors had warned him about her penchant for keeping an eye on everyone else to make sure they followed the rules and regulations.

He’d learned the hard way how much she liked complaining. Her letters to the home owner’s association had cost him several fines and had landed him on the board’s shit list.

Clive turned on the burner under the meat sauce to warm it up for their dinner. His daughter Chelsea always pre-cooked meals he could heat up. She was working tonight, so he was responsible for feeding and getting his granddaughter ready for bed.

Before his wife Margaret died, she used to be responsible for taking care of Margie, her namesake. Their daughter had been living with them ever since she became pregnant and her no-good fiancé had done nothing to help her out. Couldn’t hold a job to save his life, and now he was in jail for the next couple of years for stealing a car.

Clive shook his head as he moved around the kitchen, getting plates and glasses ready for their meal. Though his daughter had made a huge mistake having a kid with that loser, Clive wasn’t the least bit sorry about his granddaughter. She brought him joy and happiness every single day, and now that he was retired from his construction business, having her around kept him busy when he’d otherwise have to find ways to occupy himself.

Chelsea had her own ideas about how he could occupy himself. She thought he was overdue to start dating, but he couldn't muster the enthusiasm for a long-term commitment at this point. Besides, he wasn't sure what kind of woman he liked anymore. Margaret had been a jewel. As a mother, she'd been patient and affectionate with their three kids. She'd been supportive by working as his administrative assistant and billing department all by herself. And he certainly couldn't have asked for a more perfect wife, one who loved him unconditionally and never failed to lift his spirits with encouraging words. He didn't have high hopes of finding someone exactly like her again.

He did know, however, what he wasn't looking for. He couldn't fathom being involved with a woman like Renee Joseph—miserable, cranky, and in general lacking the joy of life. He'd only seen her smile a few times, and not at him.

Her personality turned him off, but her physical appearance—that was another matter. Her smile, though rare, was pretty and framed by dimples, and she was short, with toffee skin poured over a shapely frame. She taught at the nearby high school and during the school year, always dressed in an understated yet sexy manner in pleated trousers and tailored dresses that made his eyes linger on her breasts and hips.

Her hair was cut in a short, trendy style and jet black. It caressed her face and neck and always looked shiny and soft. On more than one occasion, he'd fantasized about running his fingers through it to test the texture. On more than one occasion, he'd imagined taking a handful and tugging back her head so he could have unfettered access to her angry mouth, her smooth throat, her magnificent breasts.

Shit. Clive shook his head.

"Dinner's ready. Go wash up," he told Margie.

"Okay!" She hopped up from the floor. "Smells good, Grandpa," she said, darting in the direction of the half bath downstairs.

Clive removed the garlic bread from the oven and tossed the oven mitt onto the counter. He shouldn't be daydreaming about that woman. Just his rotten luck, the woman he couldn't stand, and who couldn't stand him, was the one woman he couldn't stop thinking about. No point in thinking about her anyway.

A classy woman like Renee Joseph wouldn't have any interest in a common laborer like him.

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About the Author

Delaney Diamond is the USA Today Bestselling Author of sweet, sensual, passionate romance novels. Originally from the U.S. Virgin Islands, she now lives in Atlanta, Georgia. She reads romance novels, mysteries, thrillers, and a fair amount of nonfiction. When she's not busy reading or writing, she's in the kitchen trying out new recipes, dining at one of her favorite restaurants, or traveling to an interesting locale.

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