



Synopsis

One night changes everything . . . again.

Years ago, when Ryan Stewart saw Shawna Ferguson, it was love at first sight. Unfortunately, he wasn't a free man, and his deception caused him to lose her after a weekend that changed his life.

When Shawna's sister and brother-in-law set her up on a blind date, she has no idea it's with Ryan, with whom she'd spent a weekend she wishes she could forget. She reluctantly agrees to finish the date with him, but doing so leaves her vulnerable to his charms and the heat he ignited in her that very first night.

The Blind Date

by Delaney Diamond

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Chapter One

Shawna Ferguson was late. Very late. And she hated being late because she valued people's time the same way she wanted them to value hers.

Bottom line, she'd have to bite the bullet and buy a new car, no matter how much she dreaded the car-buying process. Her once dependable Corolla was no longer dependable now that it was on its last leg.

She hurried to the front door of her favorite French restaurant, the heels of her Manolo Blahniks hitting the pavement hard with each stride. She pulled her camel-colored wrap sweater tighter over her sleeveless dress to protect against the chill in the air. It was early spring, that time of year when the days were warm but the nights were cool, and the best way to protect against the changes in temperature meant dressing in layers.

A blind date.

Why had she agreed to this? For some reason she'd listened to her older sister, Yvonne, and decided to take the plunge back into the dating pool, even though her luck with men seemed to have run out months ago.

The three-day-old conversation with Yvonne about tonight's date replayed in her head.

Yvonne Wallace looked at Shawna from across the table in the kitchen. They were having breakfast, and as usual, Little Miss Homemaker—as Shawna liked to teasingly call her sister—had set out a feast of homemade raisin bread, butter and homemade jam, scrambled eggs, and fruit cups.

Only two years separated the sisters, but their personalities were as different as black and white. While Shawna had dreamed of opening her own boutique, which she'd accomplished four years ago, Yvonne had dreamed of becoming a wife and mother. At twenty-four she'd married a doctor, and by their second anniversary, she'd quit her job to make that dream a reality. After six years of marriage, they had a four-year-old daughter and two-year-old son, and Yvonne was seven months pregnant with her second son. Taking care of her family and getting ready for the baby filled her days.

Yvonne was one of those people who, because she was happily married, wanted the same for everyone else. She'd found her Mr. Right and claimed he existed for every woman. Shawna knew better. Finding a good man—with whom one was compatible—seemed as unrealistic as finding a

diamond mine on her property. Basically, it wasn't gonna happen, and Shawna had resigned herself to the fact.

Her sister couldn't seem to understand she was perfectly happy being single, and she kept trying to help Shawna find a man through "chance" meetings and "unexpected" visits when Shawna came to visit her.

When the conversation came up about her paltry dating options, Shawna had a solution. "I'll hire an escort the next time I need to attend an event with a date." She shrugged.

"Ew. You will not. No sister of mine is going to pay for a date."

"There's nothing nasty about it," Shawna said. "Lots of women do it nowadays."

"Desperate women."

"*No*. Women who don't have the time or energy to sift through what's out there. The companies match you up with someone who has similar interests, you go out, and then you're done. Bam. No fuss, no muss."

"Why do that when I have the perfect man for you?"

"I'm not looking for a man."

Yvonne rolled her eyes. "Okay, whatever. I have the perfect *escort* for you. Is that better?"

"No offense, but you haven't exactly done a good job setting me up with the right men in the past." Shawna pretended to be in deep thought. "Let's see, remember the guy from your church, Steve, who started singing hymns in the car on the ride back home and prayed for my soul as we stood at the front door?"

"He loves the Lord. What's wrong with that?"

Shawna narrowed her eyes and continued. "David, who wouldn't stop talking about his ex-wife the entire night. Our date ended with him crying on my shoulder about how much he missed her."

"Look at the bright side. You got a free meal, and at least you didn't waste any more time with him than necessary. One date in and you already knew he was wrong for you."

"And I can't forget Nolan. Sexy, suave, rich. What a surprise to see his face on the evening news as the person who'd robbed several banks in the area and left lines of poetry as his trademark. Just think, I can say I dated the Poetry Bandit."

"Granted, I should have dug a little deeper when he said he worked in banking."

Shawna sighed. "I know you mean well, but your choice in men leaves me a bit . . . how should I say this? Terrified." Shawna slathered butter on the bread and bit into a crunchy slice.

“This guy could be right for you, though. I really think the two of you will hit it off.”

“How do you know him?”

“So you’re interested?”

“Answer the question.”

“He’s a friend of William’s.”

The fact that he was one of her brother-in-law’s friends meant he was probably better vetted than the men her sister had introduced her to in the past. Interest piqued, she said, “Tell me about him.”

“I thought you weren’t interested.”

“Would you tell me about him!”

Yvonne giggled, cocky in her triumph. “Like I said, William knows him better, but I’ve also met him, and he’s really nice. You’ll like him.”

“What does he look like?”

“He’s about six feet tall. Great personality, really nice guy.”

Shawna watched her sister closely. She seemed evasive, which made Shawna suspicious. “You mentioned nice twice, but not whether or not he’s attractive. Does he have an eye in the middle of his forehead or something?”

Yvonne waved her hand and snorted, as if to say, *don’t be ridiculous*. “Of course not.”

“Then what does he look like?”

“Don’t worry, he’s attractive. He’s not your usual type, that’s all. So please don’t do that thing you do.”

“What thing?” Shawna asked, already offended.

“You know that thing you do when you’re trying to cover up your surprise or when you don’t like something—you smile, but it’s this weird, creepy smile. Be open-minded.”

“I don’t do that. And why would I need to be open-minded? What’s wrong with him, Yvonne?” Concern started to set in.

“Nothing. But really, I don’t want to spoil the surprise. Trust your big sister on this one, okay?”

So she’d trusted her sister and shown up here to meet a complete stranger.

When Shawna entered the restaurant, smiling staff welcomed her with a “*Bienvenue!*” She told the hostess she had a reservation and gave her the name of the person with whom she had the meeting. “Roger James.”

“Your party’s already here.” The brunette smiled, and her gaze drifted to the interior wall, outside Shawna’s line of vision.

Shawna pasted a smile on her face and stepped forward to get a good look. That’s when her date stepped from the dim interior into the better-lit entryway.

Her smile froze in place and her body became as stiff as a corpse.

It wasn’t that her date was unattractive. Oh no, he didn’t suffer from a deficiency in looks at all. In fact, he was sexy. Hella sexy. Even more sexy than the last time she’d seen him, though a bit underdressed in a pair of jeans and a button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up to reveal rugged arms dusted with fine hair. Wisps of dark hair, which she knew from firsthand experience were soft, brushed the collar of his striped shirt.

She pressed her palm to her chest in a futile attempt to control the erratic beat of her heart. Unfortunately, her brain had gone into overdrive, reminding her of unbridled passion in Chicago six years ago when she’d fallen into bed with this man.

She’d never forgotten the two torrid nights they’d spent together where the intimacies they shared had left her breathless and exhausted in his arms. Every caress of his lips and touch of his rough, work-worn hands was seared into her brain. And she could never, ever forget what it felt like to have the dark stubble shadowing his jaw graze the sensitive spot on her neck—or the skin of her inner thigh.

Her knees weakened at the thought.

A corner of his lips did a slow slant upward, and Shawna tore her eyes away from the invitation in them to stare into a pair of amazing blue eyes that rooted her in place.

“Hello, Shawna.” The mellow sound of his voice greeted her as he approached. He exuded a confidence and casual virility not present during their first introduction. Back then, he’d been a little less sure of himself, though very charming.

The sound of her name on his tongue sent a tremor through every cell of her body. “Ryan.” She whispered his name in disbelief because his name wasn’t Roger James, and he wasn’t a stranger. She’d hoped never to set eyes on this man again.

“It’s good to see you, love.”

Shocked out of her reverie by the affectionate word, rage erupted inside of Shawna. She hadn't seen him since that day in Chicago when her heart had shattered into a thousand pieces. She did what she hadn't been able to do back then.

She hauled back and slapped him.

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