



Blurb

They didn't mean to fall in love...

Brenda Morrison has known Jay Santorini for years, but he's off limits. He's her friend's ex-husband, and except for one slip-up, they've always had a platonic relationship. But now that she's back in Atlanta, the smoldering attraction between them is much harder to resist.

Jay has always kept a hands-off approach to Brenda, and the time they spend together starts out innocently enough, or so he pretends. Because the truth is, Jay has feelings for her, and those feelings are anything but innocent.

An Unexpected Attraction

by Delaney Diamond

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Prologue

Twelve years ago...

“Life in Naples sounds idyllic, but aren’t you a little biased?” Brenda teased.

“My biased opinion does not make what I say any less true,” Jay informed her, keeping his eyes on the road.

Outside, rain banged against the windshield, dropping in pailfuls from the night sky. The wiper blades of the sedan launched back and forth across the glass at a frantic pace to keep up.

“I bet you didn’t know Naples is the third largest city in Italy,” he continued. A proud *napoletano*, he took every opportunity to speak of the historic city’s finer attributes and promote the culture to anyone who listened. “You must visit one day. There is so much to see and do. Beautiful beaches along the coast. A lot of museums, all with important collections that tell the history of our country and the region. Then there is the Royal Palace of Naples—a must-see. And of course, the food in my home city is excellent.”

“Of course,” Brenda said, poker-faced.

He chuckled. She never missed an opportunity to needle him about his Italian pride. “Trust me, we have some of the best restaurants in the entire country. And if you want to eat real pizza, good pizza, *oh mio dio*,” he kissed his fingertips, “you will not find better than in Naples.”

She sat angled toward him, listening attentively to his words. “You’ve convinced me, Jay. I will definitely visit one day.”

“You should go when I’m at home. I will make sure you have a good experience.” He glanced sideways at her to gauge her reaction to his suggestion.

She smiled a bit shyly, but certainly with pleasure. “Deal. I’ll go when you’re there and you can show me around.”

Jay smiled, too, energized by her reaction, and began a descriptive conversation about his birthplace and family who still resided there.

All too soon, the car ride came to an end. The engaging talk had kept his mind from the sobering thought that they’d have to part when he arrived at her apartment. Heavy-hearted, he fell into a quiet funk, wishing he could extend their time alone together.

He pulled up outside the apartment building, but a couple of cars parked right in front of the door prevented him from pulling any closer.

“Darn,” Brenda said, sighing. “Too bad we can’t plough into their cars and make them move.”

He heard the humor in the words but couldn’t respond to it. He didn’t want her to go. “That wouldn’t be very nice to hit their cars,” he said.

She grinned at him. “I was kidding. You’re such a good guy.”

He stared straight ahead, jaw tightening. “I’m not a good guy.” Good guys didn’t contemplate ways to prolong their time with a woman they shouldn’t want. Good guys didn’t imagine that same woman naked.

“Why do you say you’re not a good guy?” She sounded amused.

“Because I’m not.”

An uncomfortable silence filled the car. There were things he wanted to say to her and internally debated if he should. Maybe he should tell her the truth about his feelings.

“It’s really raining hard. I’ll have to make a run for it,” she said.

He should have popped the lock and let her out, but instead Jay pulled away from the building.

“What are you doing?” Brenda demanded.

He glided into a space farther away from the front door. It was Saturday night and only a few cars were in the parking lot because many of the student residents were out partying before they left for break.

He turned off the car and twisted to face her, summoning the courage to speak the words on his heart.

“What’s going on?” she asked in a quiet voice. Lines of confusion marked her forehead.

“I think about you all the time,” Jay said. A heavy weight lifted from his shoulders with that admission. He took her hand, and surprisingly, she let him. He stroked her slender fingers. Her skin felt like velvet. “I don’t know what to do about the way I feel. It is like...like a torture I cannot be free from.”

Her fingers curled against his palm. “Jenna’s my friend.”

He chose to ignore her words and tightened his hand around her fisted fingers, slowly prying them open, one by one and with very little resistance. He lowered his lips and planted a kiss in the middle of her palm. She didn’t pull away, and her breathing pattern changed from normal to sporadic. Encouraged, he let his lips move in gentle strokes to the inside of her wrist.

He knew he was wrong. He knew he should stop. But all thoughts of stopping evaporated when she swayed toward him, lips parted, eyes pleading for more intimate contact.

After that, everything happened so fast. He pulled her across his lap so that she straddled him on the seat. The confines of the car made movement difficult, but he'd had to touch her.

Now, he had to taste her, too...

Chapter One

Present day

No reaction. Not laughter. Not even tears. His death had devastated them all, and one day, Brenda Morrison would look back on this night and recognize it was the beginning of the end, the last time the five of them came together as friends. Not only because of his passing, but because of her own personal evolution, and how her relationship with one person in particular transformed against her better judgment.

The somberness in her friends' faces was no doubt reflected in her own. Charlie, the sixth member of their rat pack crew, had been killed a mere month before he was scheduled to tie the knot. Three thugs had entered his home one afternoon and been surprised when they encountered him. One of them shot him in the back when he tried to escape. They'd left her friend to die, bleeding out on the staircase in his home. Had it not been for the very conspicuous black BMW the teens had driven off in, back to their upper middle class neighborhood, the crime might have gone unsolved.

Brenda and her friends had attended the funeral and spent several hours with his family before coming to his favorite Italian restaurant for drinks—a casual dining establishment with two bars, an average menu but potent alcoholic beverages, and a dueling piano show that attracted customers from neighboring cities.

In her mind's eye she saw Charlie's dark brown skin and laughing eyes. He'd been a horrible procrastinator, but he'd never had a bad word to say about a single person. He didn't deserve such a vicious, untimely death. His sudden passing had left behind an empty hole in their hearts, a fiancée and, they'd learned today, an unborn child.

"He wouldn't want us to sit here like this," Sophie said. She sat beside Brenda with wild, curly hair and a host of colorful bangles and earrings, representative of her quirky style and personality. "He wouldn't want us to dwell on his death. He'd want us to talk about how he lived. Charlie loved having a good time. He'd want us to remember the good times and laugh."

She was right. Brenda opened her mouth to speak, to say something witty and funny about Charlie, but she couldn't find the words. Her heart heavy and filled with the pain of loss, she remained silent. So did everyone else.

"Come on, guys," Sophie pleaded. "Don't we owe it to Charlie to at least pay him his due?"

To Sophie's right sat Nick, who'd flown in from Europe. The wise-cracking member, his dark brown hair stood on end from constantly running his fingers through it. He'd been closer to Charlie than any of them, so understandably, he took his death the hardest. Brenda quietly kept an eye on how many glasses of Grey Goose vodka he consumed.

The silence remained—heavy, somber, until a smile lifted a corner of Nick's mouth.

“That son of a bitch owed me two thousand dollars for that quote, unquote, new-and-improved quattrocycle he created. No matter how many times I told him to forget about the money, he always insisted he'd pay me back.” He leaned onto his forearms, gaze sweeping the table to encompass the group. “A couple of months ago he sent a spreadsheet with the total and the amount of interest that had accrued. He swore before the end of the year he would pay me back.” He shook his head. “Crazy son of a bitch.”

Charlie owned dozens of patents for mechanical creations no one had an interest in. Since college he had borrowed money from friends and worked on ideas he claimed would one day make him a millionaire. None of them had been successful, but he never quit trying.

“Guess you'll have to write off the debt after all,” Jenna said. She sat across from Brenda with her chin resting in her hand. A few strands of lengthy blonde hair fell forward over her shoulder.

“Guess so,” Nick agreed with a wry, mournful smile.

“He owed me ten thousand dollars.” All eyes turned to Jay Santorini, Jenna's ex-husband. He sat to Jenna's left, subdued and slouched in a chair, tie undone. He'd placed his jacket over the back of the chair. Rolled up shirtsleeves revealed strong forearms sprinkled with a dusting of hair the same midnight shade as the curls on his head. Long fingers cradled a tumbler of Scotch, and every now and again he lifted the glass to take a minute sip.

“You gave him ten grand?” Nick asked. “What were you thinking?”

“Multiple loans over the years.” Jay shrugged. As the wealthiest member of their circle of friends, ten thousand probably hadn't put much of a dent in his finances. “I believed in him, and who could resist Charlie?”

They all nodded.

“Remember when he was looking into alternative fuels and went around to all those restaurants collecting oil at the end of the day?” Nick asked.

“Ohmigod,” Sophie said, shaking her head. “Do you know that fool dragged me into that mess? He had me hitting up the wing joint and the soul food restaurant near my apartment, collecting oil for him.”

“No, you didn’t,” Brenda said, laughing.

“Yes! Consider yourself lucky you lived in Chicago at the time, or he would have roped you in, too, I’m sure.”

Jenna giggled, casting a sidelong glance at Jay. “Guess who put that *alternative* fuel in his Mercedes?”

“No,” Sophie said, wide-eyed.

“In my defense, it was the older model.” Jay’s grey eyes lit with amusement. Brenda could still hear a little bit of his Italian accent, even though he’d lived in Georgia for years. He set his elbow on the table and pointed at no one in particular. “I’m telling you, I drove around for a whole week without having to buy gas. Charlie was onto something.”

They all fell out laughing, and that was the beginning of the Charlie stories.

Jay ordered appetizers, and before long plenty of alcoholic beverages and mediocre Italian food accompanied the reminiscing. Spirits lifted, they became the most raucous table in the restaurant, but they ignored the dirty looks from the other patrons. Tonight was about Charlie and celebrating his life.

Sometime later, Jenna covered a wide yawn with her hand. “I’d better get going,” she said.

Nick frowned and looked at his watch. “It’s early—only eight thirty.”

“By the time I get back to the hotel and settle down for the night, it’ll be late. My flight leaves in the morning, and I need to check on the boys before I go to bed.” Jenna and Jay had two boys, ten-year-old fraternal twins. “Mind walking me out?” she asked Jay in a low voice.

She placed a hand on his hair-sprinkled forearm to get his attention. Brenda looked away from the sight of them touching, settling her attention on the dueling pianists prepping the stage for their act.

She didn’t hear Jay’s response, but he and Jenna stood at the same time, prompting a round of goodbyes and hugs. Jay walked her out while the rest of them remained at the table. At least fifteen minutes passed before he came back, and when he did, his expression was grim. Brenda briefly wondered what had happened but didn’t dare ask. She steered clear of anything involving Jay and Jenna.

The dueling pianists started their set, part musical and part comedic show. Both musicians sang loud and strong, and at one point one of them played with his toes. Not to be outdone, the other countered by climbing on top of the piano, hanging over the edge, and tapping out his song on the keys, all while upside down and backwards.

Brenda hopped up from the table. “Let’s dance,” she said. There wasn’t a dance floor, but she dragged Sophie from the chair to the front of the stage. Sophie was her partner in crime and could always be counted on to go along with a wild idea, not to mention she came up with many of her own.

Encouraged by whistles and whooping from Jay, Nick, and a table of young professionals, she and Sophie worked up a sweat doing the bump, the mashed potato, and the twist to doo-wop music from the 1960’s. They sang along with the musicians and danced away the pain of loss. When a couple of older men joined them in front of the stage, even more patrons cheered and clapped, turning the quartet into impromptu stars of the restaurant.

Finally, the pianists took a break, and the dancing ended.

“We had a little help with the set tonight,” the pianist on the left said into the microphone. “Another round of applause for these lovely ladies and their very lucky partners.”

Most of the patrons rose to their feet and applauded. Sophie curtsied, Brenda bowed with a flourish, and their dance partners inclined their heads.

Brenda’s partner placed a hand on her shoulder. “Thank you for the dance. I’m pretty sure I broke something, but it was worth it to have a dance with a lovely young woman like you.” He winked and followed his friend to their table.

“Did you hear him?” she asked Sophie.

“I did. Consider yourself lucky. The guy I danced with tried to get my phone number. He’s old enough to be my father!”

Out of breath and laughing hysterically, they stumbled back to their table and fell into the chairs.

They all lingered over drinks and picked at the remains of food on their plates, loathed to go their separate ways because times like these—when they could be together and have fun away from the grind of daily life—had become rare over the years.

Jay ordered another round of drinks, and when everyone had taken sips and quiet descended on the table, he held up his glass. “To living life to the fullest, with no regrets. And to Charlie, for teaching us how to live. Cheers.”

“To Charlie,” the others echoed, and they clinked their glasses together in the middle of the table.

Under the weight of memories and nostalgia, Brenda stood, swaying a little with the half empty glass of Long Island Iced Tea in her hand.

“Careful now,” Jay teased.

She placed a hand on her hip. “I’m always careful,” she said tartly.

His mouth smiled, but those eyes of his watched her closely. That assessing expression appeared every so often and always gave her pause. What was he thinking when he looked at her that way?

“Speech, speech, speech,” Nick and Sophie chorused.

She waved them into silence and took a deep breath. “I feel as if I’ve known you guys all my life. We’ve been through a lot together, and if I never told you before, I hope you know how important you are to me. I’m loving this new chapter in my life.” She’d been the east coast editor of *The Entertainment Report*, headquartered in Los Angeles, for a little over six months. She had the ability to craft her edition of the magazine in almost any way she wanted, an editor’s dream. “I love my new job and the opportunities it’s presented. I’m so glad I have good friends like you Sophie, Nick...” Her throat tightened with sentimentality as her gaze landed on each of them. When it moved to Jay, she saw an unidentifiable emotion flicker in the depths of his eyes, one that momentarily stole her breath and sent her heart tripping over itself. “And Jay.” She swallowed and looked away from him or she’d never be able to finish. Her heart beat as fast as when she’d danced in front of the stage. Perhaps she’d had way more to drink than she realized. “Words can’t express how much you all mean to me.”

“Awww,” Sophie said.

Brenda placed a finger over her lips. “Shhh. This is my moment.” There were soft chuckles around the table. “Seriously, though, here’s to good friends. I love you all!”

“Here, here!” her friends yelled.

They clinked their glasses together again, and she took a deep swallow from hers.

“Now sit your butt down.” Sophie pulled her back onto the seat and into a hug. “Love you, too,” she whispered. Charlie’s death had made the word *love* flow freely all day long.

The waitress arrived at the table, a pretty redhead named Gina. “Can I get you anything else?” she asked. Her gaze encompassed the entire group before settling on Jay.

“Unless you’re going to give me your number, I’m fine,” he said with a playful grin. Often the charmer and flirt, his behavior came as no surprise.

Gina blushed. “Would any of you like more to drink? More to eat?”

It was obvious she was interested. She didn’t take her eyes off of him. With his dark Italian looks and short beard, he exuded masculinity. He could have her in the cooler in the back if he tried hard enough. Brenda stared down into her almost empty glass.

“Just the check,” Jay said. “I’m picking up the tab for this bunch of hooligans. Please thank the management for not kicking us out.”

“Awww, isn’t he generous?” Nick hooked his arm around Jay’s neck.

“I’ll pay for everybody but this guy,” Jay added, pointing at his friend with his thumb.

Sophie tossed her cloth napkin across the table and it landed on his empty plate. “You’re terrible,” she said. Her eyes flirted with him, and Jay grinned but didn’t offer further encouragement.

Sophie didn’t lack male attention, but she remained in an on-again-off-again relationship with a man who was no good for her, which tended to limit her dating options. Brenda had never suspected Sophie might be interested in Jay, but the moment that passed between them suggested otherwise. Unease lodged in her chest and warmed the spot right beneath her sternum, making her toss back the watery remnants of the Long Island Iced Tea.

Gina busied the table and Jay took the black leather checkbook she handed him. He looked inside and immediately glanced up in Gina’s direction, but she had already walked away with their empty plates. A slow, stealthy smile spread across his face. He looked very much like someone who’d received exactly what he wanted. No doubt Gina had supplied her phone number. Surprise, surprise.

Jay’s gaze collided with Brenda’s and she froze. She hadn’t meant to stare, but that’s exactly what she’d done and quickly looked away, albeit too late.

She’d grown accustomed to seeing women react to Jay. They were often drawn to him.

He wasn’t overly tall, topping out a little over six feet, but when he entered a room he called attention to himself *without* calling attention to himself. He really didn’t *do* anything, except be...Jay. Casually sexy in the way that some men are. Under the right circumstances his smile turned impish, which when paired with his other physical attributes, made him spectacular to look at. Most women could easily be seduced by the slightest bit of interest from a man like him.

Most.

If things were different...

Brenda dismissed her musing as that of someone who'd clearly had too much to drink. She shouldn't hypothesize about what could have been. No point in having her thoughts go in that direction.

Years ago that bridge had been crossed, burned, and charred to a brittle crisp.

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