



Blurb

She has never forgotten Venice. Neither has he.

Reed Stewart is busy with his daughter. Anika Taylor is busy with her career. Then they run into each other years after a trip that turned their lives upside down. When Reed hires Anika's interior design firm to redecorate his home, the attraction between them burns just as strong as ever. But Anika has a painful secret. If she shares it, she runs the risk of losing Reed for good.

That Time in Venice

by Delaney Diamond

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Prologue

Venice

Anika woke up wedged against Reed. With her head resting on his shoulder and his strong arms around her, she could almost believe their stilted conversation the night before had been a bad dream. She'd known their time together wouldn't last forever, but found it hard to let go.

She lay quietly, basking in the heat of his skin, dreading the moment he said goodbye.

"Good morning," Reed croaked.

She rolled away from him without a word, and he sat up on the side of the bed. The muscles of his back were within touching distance, but she didn't touch, no matter how much she ached for the contact. He was leaving today, and the distance between them grew wider with each passing minute.

Don't embarrass yourself. It's over. It was fun while it lasted.

They dressed quietly, pulling on jeans and tops, their movements robotic and stiff. While Anika brushed her hair, she watched Reed in the mirror. He hunted for his shoes, finding one next to the wall and the other under the bed. Their lovemaking had been particularly feverish last night, their clothes strewn across the room with a level of carelessness and impatience before unseen.

By the time she finished pinning up her hair, he was on his feet. Today he left for Turin and would then travel to France. She'd offered him an extra night in her room, but he claimed to be on a tight schedule.

They stood across the room from each other, and she realized she couldn't let him go without making one last effort to turn the past few days into something more than a cheap fling.

"We um, we could exchange numbers. You know, to keep in touch. Maybe we could hang out once you're back in the States."

Reed rubbed the back of his neck, barely making eye contact. "I'm moving to New York when I get back. I already have a job lined up at the accounting firm where I interned." He sighed. "Listen, it's better this way."

"So this is it?" It couldn't be. The thought of never seeing him again sent a frisson of pain straight to her heart.

"We had fun, and I think it's best if what happened here...stayed here."

She pressed her trembling lips together, praying he didn't notice how her eyes filled with tears. She had been fooled. This was the real Reed. A player, a drifter with a devil-may-care attitude. A man who definitely didn't care about her.

He cursed and shoved long fingers through his messy curls. "I didn't mean to hurt you, Anika."

She kept balance to her voice. "I'm not hurt. We had a good time, and now it's at an end. I'm fine. You're fine. You never made me any promises." Her body had never been under this type of stress before. Pain twisted her insides tighter than nautical rope.

He took a step toward her, his face fixed in a piteous expression. "Anika...you deserve the ideal. A fairytale. I'm not the person to give it to you. I'm not a prince. You should forget about me."

Impossible, but she lifted her chin and glared at him. "You're right. You're no prince." Her voice shook, and she stared at the ground as tears swelled anew in her eyes. "Go. Please."

He didn't leave as she asked, and she continued to stare at the tan and brown carpet. Surely he'd be kind enough to get out so she could grieve in private.

"You're a great girl, Anika. Someone will appreciate you one of these days."

His words only sharpened the pain. She didn't care about a potential man from the future. In a short period of time, she'd fallen for him, Reed Stewart, and banal comments about what the future held couldn't neutralize the agonizing emptiness that stretched out before her.

She memorized every detail of his features. His height, his broad shoulders and fit body beneath the dark T-shirt and jeans, the curls she'd grown so accustomed to running her fingers through, the shadow of hair on his jaw, and the sorrow in his clear blue eyes. He was so much more than she had ever dared to dream she could have.

"I know," she whispered.

Silence filled the room.

"Anika."

"Just go, Reed." She pleaded now, begging for a reprieve.

He swallowed hard and then left.

The minute the door closed, Anika flung herself onto the bed. She'd been broken down and emptied of everything but the pain of losing him. Sobbing, she pressed her face into the pillow where he'd lain. The scent of him still lingered on the fabric. A scent she would not soon forget.

Chapter 1

“Good morning,” Anika Taylor sang at the receptionist as she walked into Davenport Design Studio. She dropped her umbrella in the container at the front door.

Jasmine, her shoulder length dark hair flipped up at the ends, turned away from the printer behind her desk and shoved a pair of horn-rimmed glasses higher on her broad nose. “What are you so happy about on a rainy Monday morning?”

“I’m happy to be alive. Do I need any other reason?”

“Hmmm...you must have had a great date this weekend.”

“Sadly, I didn’t.” Anika rolled her eyes, and her coworker laughed.

Online dating had been a bust so far. She tended to date older men, often twice her age. They were mature and well-established, and most of them didn’t play games. That wasn’t the case with this weekend’s bachelor. Men were men whatever their age, it turned out.

Friday, her second date with an investment banker went downhill fast, starting with him complaining about how he believed his children—both in college—were taking advantage of his generosity. The night ended on a sour note when he tried to guilt her into bed because he’d taken her out for an expensive meal. She couldn’t believe a man his age believed a prix-fixe meal that totaled in the low three-digits warranted her taking her clothes off. Whatever happened to companionship? Getting to know someone?

Before sliding behind the wheel of her own vehicle, Anika had handed him a hundred-dollar bill to cover her dinner and instructed him to lose her number.

A sly smile slid across her lips. “You’ll never guess what I got.” With exaggerated slowness, she pulled a Starbucks sack from her large purse and placed it gently on the desk.

Jasmine’s eyes widened and she breathed the next words. “You. Did. Not.”

“It was the last one.”

Jasmine groaned. “You’re such a bad influence. You know I can’t eat whatever I want like you do.”

Anika eyed her coworker’s frame. Jasmine was solid and curvy, but not overweight. “Please, you can afford to cheat every now and again.”

With that little encouragement, Jasmine snatched up the sack containing the chocolate croissant and opened it. She sniffed the contents, taking a prolonged drag. “You had them warm it for me.” Her grateful eyes met Anika’s.

“Of course. Had them do the same for me.” She patted the leather bag on her shoulder, indicating one of the tasty pastries was in there for her, too. “Break room in five minutes?”

Jasmine’s brow wrinkled. “We won’t be able to.”

“Why not?”

They always enjoyed their chocolate croissants together over cups of steaming black coffee while they gossiped in the break room. On a rainy Monday morning, the phones wouldn’t be ringing much, and anyway, Jasmine could have calls rolled to the answering service while they took the short break.

“Laura has a new client coming in today and she wants you in on the meeting. He’ll be here at eight thirty, so you better hurry.”

“Why did she schedule a meeting so early?” Anika grumbled.

“He’s a referral from Judge Evers, and you know Laura wants to keep her happy because it means more prestigious referrals.”

“Oh, that explains it.”

Every referral from the judge had turned into more referrals as the firm’s name was shared among a growing list of high-end clients. They couldn’t buy that type of publicity. And, Laura had talked to Anika about buying a minority stake in the company so she could take more time off in the future. This would be an opportunity for Anika to shine again.

“Oh well, I guess I’ll have my croissant later. Much later.”

Jasmine clutched the papers to her chest and bit the corner of her bottom lip. “Don’t be too upset. Judge Evers’s secretary says the new client isn’t bad on the eyes.”

Anika arched a brow in interest. “Oh yeah?”

“Mhmm.”

“I’ll see for myself and we can discuss him later.”

The two women giggled and Anika walked away.

Davenport Design Studio was an interior design firm located in Atlanta and specializing in residential interiors. The offices of the large converted house in Buckhead contained five designers, two project managers, supporting staff, interns, and Laura Davenport, the woman at the helm of the successful company.

Anika climbed the stairs to the second floor offices, her heels barely making a sound because of the burgundy carpet runner. Walking briskly down the hall, she waved to other members of the team, including another good work friend named Edgar, one of the project managers. She entered

her office near the end of the hall and with a quick flip of a switch, light bounced off the yellow walls, casting a warm glow on the drafting table near the window and across her neat desk.

With no time to dally because she knew Laura was waiting, she hung her coat on the rack in the corner, dropped her large bag in the bottom drawer of her desk, and then wrote a quick to-do list of tasks that needed completing after the meeting. Everyone else in the office used tablets or other electronic devices to take notes and keep up with their schedules, but she preferred the old school options—notebooks to take notes and keeping up with her calendar in a pastel blue and pink planner. After a quick text to one of the interns, reminding him to stop by a local showroom to take photos of several pieces she was considering for a staging project later, Anika scraped up her pen and notepad and hurried back down the stairs to Laura’s office on the first floor.

Behind the frosted glass covering the door, she made out the singular shape of her boss. Two quick knocks and Laura called her in.

She sat behind her desk, an abundance of hairspray making her platinum blonde hair an unmoving helmet. Her makeup, jewelry, and clothing were understated but elegant.

“Good morning.”

“Anika, honey,” Laura said in her husky Southern drawl. “I’m so glad you’re here. Have a seat.” She waved Anika into the chair opposite the desk. “Judge Evers has once again sung our praises and sent us a referral, but I haven’t had time to get much information. Her secretary called late yesterday and set everything up. The judge didn’t ask for you by name, but she did mention she wanted the same designer who’d done such a wonderful job on Representative Johnson’s surprise birthday gift for his daughter. You really did do a marvelous job. You breathed new life into that place.”

“Thank you.” Laura did not hand out compliments often, so Anika knew the words were not only sincere, but she must have really done one hell of a job.

“Obviously, this new client takes priority. You know we want to keep the judge happy.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Here’s what I know.” Laura spoke with her hands a lot, gesturing, pointing, and spreading her fingers. “He’s a manager with the accounting firm Continuum, and they transferred him to the Atlanta area. He hasn’t lived here long but bought his house a few months ago and wants to redo the interior.”

“Sounds easy enough. Only redecorating?” The firm offered redecorating and remodeling services.

“That’s what I understand, but of course once you get over there, you’ll be better able to make an assessment.” Laura leaned forward. “If you do a good job on this, Anika, we’ll work something out on the ownership front. I’d love to take some time off. My husband is retiring soon and I’m not getting any younger.” She laughed.

A long time ago Laura had embraced the decision to not have children. Refusing to use the word childless, she extolled the positives of being *childfree*—freedom to do whatever she wanted when she wanted with more disposable income. On more than one occasion she’d said she didn’t think her business would have grown the way it did if she and her husband had had children. And soon she’d be using that disposable income to do more traveling and engage in more leisure activities.

Laura’s voice dropped. “I trust you, and if you’re interested, I’m willing to give you a leadership role.”

This was the opportunity she’d been waiting for. Laura was no longer hinting. That was the second time in the conversation she’d flat out made her intentions known. “I’m very interested, and I would be honored.”

As Laura prepared to reply, a knock sounded on the door and Jasmine poked her head in. “Mr. Stewart is here. Should I bring him in or wait a few minutes?”

“Oh my, he’s early.” Laura glanced at her watch. “Go ahead and bring him in, darling. We’re ready.”

Jasmine disappeared, and only moments later the door was reopened.

Laura came to her feet and extended her hand.

Anika stood as well and faced the newcomer, freezing when her gaze landed on the man who’d entered, her eyes widening fractionally when they connected with blue ones.

“Good morning, Mr. Stewart. I’m Laura Davenport, and this is—”

“Reed?” Anika said in quiet shock.

He stared back, the expression of surprise on his face undoubtedly reflected on hers.

What were the chances? She hadn’t seen him in seven years. She’d been twenty-one and had completed her junior year in college. He’d just graduated.

Anika had worked with him in the dining hall, and hadn’t known him well, but had known *of* him. Popular on campus, Reed had a reputation for having a laid back attitude and carefree demeanor. But behind the lazy smile and casual clothes had lurked a well-honed body of firm muscle. She’d seen for herself when he played Frisbee on the quad or rolled up his sleeves to empty

heavy containers at the dining hall. He played baseball, had been the president of his fraternity, and garnered quite a reputation with the coeds.

By chance, she'd gotten to know him very well, far away from everything and everyone they were familiar with. Even as her heart clenched at the memory of what they'd shared, Anika catalogued his appearance. Time had been good to him. His black curly hair was cut shorter than in the past but was just as thick and lustrous, and his eyes remained on her with the same intense, assessing stare.

He seemed taller, but she knew that couldn't be right. Perhaps because years ago he'd been comfortable wearing jeans and T-shirts, while today he oozed style and polish and appeared a little imposing in all black—black jacket, black shirt, black slacks.

Damn. He looked so...*good*.

Hair covered his chin and jaw, enough scruff to tickle and tease, but not enough to bother or annoy. She knew the sensation well—across the tips of her breasts as he sucked her nipples, and down her spine to the small of her back. His hands and lips had been *everywhere* on her body. For months after they'd parted ways, she'd woken up at odd times of the night, aching for him.

“Anika.”

Her body reacted to the warm sound of his voice, the low, sexy sound echoing inside of her. Her nipples tightened. Her pulse jumped. Her entire being quivered, recognizing the voice of the man who'd given her exquisite memories one summer a long time ago.

“Y-you live here now?” Anika asked.

He nodded. “I moved from New York six months ago.”

Laura glanced from one to the other. “So the two of you know each other?” she asked slowly.

Anika swallowed. “We—we haven't seen each other in a long time. Years. Not since...”

Reed's jaw tightened at the unspoken words left dangling in the air. His jaw had often tightened under the weight of intense emotion—anger, sadness, ecstasy. Suddenly, the memories of fierce passion, inexhaustible and relentless, evoked heat in her insides.

Her mind flashed back to heated whispers, her back pressed against a hard wall, and his hands beneath her skirt. His driving thrusts as he pinned her beneath him in bed, their hearts beating rapidly in synch, and their sweat-sprinkled bodies wrapped around each other during what had been, without a doubt, the best week of her life. An unbelievable, breathtaking six days in Italy.

Seven years, and she'd never forgotten that trip—or *him*.

“That time in Venice,” he finished for her.

Anika swallowed again, forcing back the constriction in her throat. What they’d shared had been so unexpected, starting out innocently enough before snowballing into an avalanche of emotion that almost broke her.

“Yeah,” she whispered. “Not since Venice.”

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