

Chapter One

“I don't care what you say; this trip is going to be just what my relationship with Douglas needs to push it to the next level.” Troy held the cell phone to his ear with his shoulder as he crammed the last of his toiletries into his shaving kit.

“That's just it, Troy. You don't have a relationship with Douglas. All you have are a couple of fucks.” Troy could always depend on his best friend Carlton to speak frankly, but frankly, this was not what he wanted to hear.

“Great fucks.” Troy's body tingled just thinking about the three times he and Douglas had done the dirty deed.

“But only fucks. The best you can say is that you're friends with benefits.”

“But that's going to change. This cruise is perfect. The romantic nights, the ocean, the exotic ports of call.”

“If you can keep that alley cat Douglas in your room. Good luck with that.” Carlton snorted. “You'll have to tie him to the bed.”

“That sounds like fun. Maybe he could tie me up. I should pack a few ties.” Troy dashed to the closet, pulled two silk neckties out, folded them, and put them into one of his bags and zipped it up.

Carlton sighed. “Look. I just don't want you hurt, you know. You've been in lust with Douglas since you met him a year ago, and nothing's come of it.”

“Of course something's come of it. There's something special between us, Carl. I can feel it.” Troy lugged the suitcase to the living room and placed it next to the other one and headed back to the bedroom.

“If there was, don't you think Douglas would do something about it? I'm going to tell you this because you're my best friend and I love you.” Carlton paused, and Troy braced for the blow he knew was coming. “He's just not that into you.”

Troy sank onto the bed and took a deep breath. “That's why this trip is so important. It's my chance to have him all to myself. To make him fall in love with me.”

There was silence, then a chuckle. “Well, if anyone could make a man fall for him, it's you, Troy. You're incredible. Smart. Witty. A gorgeous guy with a heart of gold. Shit, Douglas isn't good enough for you, in my opinion.”

Rolling his eyes, Troy said, “Yes, Dad. No one's good enough for your little boy.”

Carlton laughed. “Damn straight.”

“Well, here's a news flash. Your little boy wants Douglas, and he's going to get him. This week. Trust me; Douglas isn't going to know what hit him. When I get off that boat in seven days, it's going to be on Douglas's arm, and he's going to be so in love with me he'll be making reservations for a honeymoon suite in New Hampshire.”

“For your sake, I hope so.” Carlton sighed.

“Wish you were coming with us. It won't be the same without you.” That was the one thing that sucked about the cruise; all his friends, except Carlton, were going.

“No can do. My flight leaves in”—a pause, then the swearing started—“forty-five minutes! Shit, the fucking cab is stuck in fucking traffic, and I can see the sign for the fucking airport just ahead.”

“Hey, do you kiss your mother with that mouth?” Troy laughed. “Say hello to your mom for me.” If Troy hadn't booked the cruise, he'd also be on the plane to Seattle to hang out with Carlton's family for the holidays, but the chance for a once-in-a-lifetime dream vacation with Douglas was too much to resist.

“She's going to miss you, but she'll understand. Driver! Can't we get out of this mess?” Carlton shouted into the phone.

Troy winced, then laughed. “Don't worry, you'll make it.”

“Mom'll kill me if I miss the flight. She's sending a car to pick me up. Look, I'm going to get off the phone so I can yell at the traffic, the driver, and anyone else foolish enough to get in my way. It won't be pretty.”

“Okay. See you in seven days.”

“Have fun, Troy. And for what it's worth, I hope you get the man you deserve.” Carlton hung up.

Troy stared at the phone. What had Carlton meant by that? He shrugged, flipped his cell shut, and tossed it on the bed.

He glanced at the clock. Nearly nine p.m. and there was still so much to do before he left. He stood and looked over his checklist. He'd called for the cab to pick him up at five in the morning, an ungodly hour, but he needed to be at the dock in Galveston by eight to load his luggage and go through security.

He'd given his neighbor Mrs. Samms the spare key to his apartment so she could water his plants and collect his mail. His cruise tickets, passport, and itinerary were in his carry-on bag sitting on top of his two matching pieces of luggage.

He opened the door to his closet and pulled out the clothes he'd wear tomorrow. Light oatmeal-colored linen trousers, a loose cotton shirt, and a hemp belt, with a matching linen jacket. He'd gone with the lighter colors to set off his new tan.

He stared at himself in the full-length mirror on the back of the closet door, then shrugged off his white terry cloth robe. It pooled like a cloud around his feet on the floor. He'd paid good money over the last four months to build up that sun-kissed glow in a tanning salon, and now it was going to pay off.

He'd gone for an all-over tan. Not a single line marred his body. He turned and checked out his ass in the mirror. Perfect. Plump. Tanned.

If that didn't drive Douglas wild, he didn't know what would. He'd seen the way Douglas had looked at other men, especially men with darker skin. So in Troy's plan to get his man, getting a tan had been one of the first things he'd done.

He ran his hand over his abs and flat belly and turned to the side, stretching his back leg out like he'd seen so many cover models do.

"Fine as frog's hair," he whispered. His eyes dropped to his cock. "And hung like a horse." He flicked his dick with his finger, and the brief sting shot up its length and into his balls.

He chuckled and, naked, entered the bathroom to start his bath. Just an hour or so soaking in a hot tub of scented water would do him a world of good and take some of the tension out of his shoulders.

Really, there was no reason to be so tense. He had it all under control.

His dream vacation was just ten hours away.

The cigarette dangled from the old man's lips. The television blared. The bottle of whiskey he'd emptied lay on the floor next to his recliner.

He snorted in his sleep.

The cigarette fell, rolled down his belly, and came to rest on his thigh. The embers flared, burned a hole in his flannel pajama bottoms, and seared his skin.

“Fuck.”

Half-awake, still drunk, he swatted at the pain, knocking the still-burning cigarette to the floor. It rolled across the bare linoleum and landed next to the rug under the couch.

The cheap cotton rug smoked, smoldered, then ignited.

“I’m not getting out of this tub until the hot water is gone and I look like a prune.”

Troy closed his eyes, inhaled, and then exhaled, taking in the calming scents of the too-generous dose of aromatherapy salts he'd dumped into the bath. The water in the tub was the perfect temperature, the candles he'd lit gave off a soft glow, and he sank deeper in the water, letting go of the tightness in his body.

He could just imagine the look of lust on his face when Douglas first saw him, how he'd wonder if Troy's tan was all over. He couldn't wait until Douglas explored every inch of his body to discover if it was.

Carlton was all wrong. Troy wasn't fooling himself; he knew exactly the kind of man Douglas was. The kind who fucked around, but during this vacation, that was going to change.

No more alley cat.

Douglas would be eating out of Troy's hand and purring like a kitten.

The edge of the worn, floral-patterned couch caught fire; hungry red tongues of flame ate their way up the front, devouring the cushions, and then unsatisfied, leaped to the drapes behind them. As they ignited, black smoke in unrelenting hot billows rolled upward to meet the ceiling and then spread across it.

The temperature in the room skyrocketed as the fire attacked the far wall.

The old man's lungs filled with black smoke. He coughed and fell forward out of the chair, landing on the warmer-than-usual floor.

“Shit!” Coughing, gasping, near-blind, and desperate for air, he crawled on trembling hands and knees toward the door. Greedy, unmerciful, the fire took possession of the room, filling it with thick black smoke and lung-scorching heat.

The old man collapsed two feet from the door.

The entire room seemed to groan, held its breath, and then surrendered to the red and black hell of a flashover.

Slender orange fingers, searching for more oxygen to feed on, wound their way through the thin walls between apartments and found fresh fuel next door.

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All the tension left Troy's body as he soaked.

He sighed.

This, and Douglas, was all he needed. Okay, not really all, but having Douglas would be a great start.

He'd fallen for the man the first time they'd met. Douglas had been a friend of a friend in Troy's little group of friends, five gay men in their thirties who enjoyed spending time together, eating, clubbing, and dissecting their love lives. They'd called themselves the Breakfast Club because they'd met one morning at a diner after a hard night of clubbing.

Troy and Carlton, two queen-size sheets to the wind, had staggered into the diner, spotted Tom, Mark, and Mel sitting in a large booth looking equally wasted, and laughing, they'd joined them. The rest, as they say, is history.

It had been the five of them for three years. Then last year Mel had introduced Douglas to the group, and that was all she wrote for Troy.

Douglas had movie-star good looks and knew it. And he was a man-whore of the first caliber. And Troy should know one when he saw one, because he'd been a slut too.

But when Troy met Douglas, he'd given up his man-chasing ways. And gladly. Troy had found his man. Unfortunately, Douglas hadn't gotten the memo. He remained an alley cat, footloose, free of all entanglements, making the rounds to eat off the proverbial laps of different lovers.

After six months, Troy had finally maneuvered Douglas into showing up at his apartment, alone. It didn't take much more than Troy's opening a bottle of wine, pouring two glasses, and handing one to Douglas. Douglas took a sip as Troy leaned forward, trailed his finger down Douglas's ripped chest, and over one hard nipple.

"Let's fuck," Troy whispered.