



Below the Surface

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Lesbian Romance

Description: Cameron Kendall is a successful entrepreneur whose stunning appearance and professional success command attention the moment she enters a room.

Piper Morgan is a compassionate pediatric nurse who specializes in trauma. On the surface, it doesn't seem the two women have much in common beyond their mutual friend, Kelsey. But things are seldom as they first appear.

Kelsey thinks she can remedy the loneliness that envelops her friends' lives. She suggests Piper get to know Cameron differently. Piper notes a tiny crinkle in Kelsey's plan: Piper used to be a dominatrix at the local Kink Bar, Union. Doubtful that another dominant personality would interest her, she scoffs at the suggestion. That is until Kelsey reveals Cameron is a submissive outside the boardroom.

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One

PIPER

Cameron Kendall is unlike any woman I've known—anyone I've met. She exudes power when she enters a room. It's a sight to behold. I've watched people's heads turn, and their eyes follow her across the room. I've always enjoyed listening to her speak about her work—building her company and her commitment to giving back. I never gave any thought to her romantic relationships or her sexual proclivities. Why would I? For starters, she's Kelsey's best friend, and Kelsey is one of my closest friends. That makes thoughts of Cameron off-limits. Even if that weren't the case, I wouldn't spend energy wondering or fantasizing about Cameron. It's doubtful we would be compatible as anything more than friends—or so I thought.

“What do you think of Cam?” Kelsey asks.

“What do you mean? I like Cameron.”

“And?”

“And?”

“Are you attracted to her?” Kelsey asks.

The question takes me aback. “To Cameron Kendall?”

“That is the only Cameron I know,” Kelsey replies.

“Cute.”

“Well? Are you?”

“Cameron is gorgeous,” I say.

“But are you attracted to her?”

“Where is this coming from?”

“Is that a no?”

“Kelsey, I swear to you, I’ve never given a thought to Cameron in that way.”

“Seriously?”

My head is beginning to throb.

“Why not?” Kelsey asks me.

“Why would I?” I return.

“Most people I know have given it at least one thought—sleeping with Cam.”

Kelsey’s remark doesn’t surprise me. Cameron is a beautiful woman. I nod.

“I think you should give it some thought,” Kelsey says.

I laugh.

“Why is that funny? Cam’s lonely, and so are you.”

“I’m not lonely, Kelsey.”

“When was the last time you got laid?”

“Blunt much?”

“Well?”

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“It’s been a while,” I admit.

Kelsey grins.

“Kelsey, I’m not interested in casual sex.”

“Since when?”

I sigh.

“You don’t miss it—at all?” she asks.

“Sure, I miss it.”

“You could come back to the club.”

“No thanks.”

“There are people who would welcome you back.”

I laugh easily. “Good to know.”

“Cam isn’t into that scene, either,” Kelsey says. “Maybe you’d be a good fit.”

I set down the glass in my hand and push it aside. “Where is this coming from?”

“I never thought about it much until last week.”

I shake my head in confusion.

“At Caleb’s birthday party,” Kelsey says.

“I’m afraid to ask how Caleb’s party made you think about me and Cameron.”

“You two spent a lot of time talking.”

If my head spins any more, it will pop off my neck. I talk to Cameron whenever we’re at gatherings together. We often spend most of the evening talking to each other. “That’s not exactly new, Kelsey.”

“No. I never noticed the way she looks at you until last Friday.”

“The way Cameron looks at me?” I chuckle. “You must’ve been drunker than I thought.”

“Nope.”

“Kelsey, I don’t think Cam and I would be compatible.”

“I do.”

I scratch my brow.

“Maybe you should think about getting to know her differently,” Kelsey suggests.

“By differently, do you mean taking her to bed?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Two dominant personalities a match does not make. I learned that the hard way.”

“That’s not always true.”

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“Well, I’ll stick to the narrative, thanks.”

Kelsey sighs, sips her martini, and sighs again.

“What?” I ask.

“Cam isn’t like that,” she tells me.

I am spinning again. I sip from my martini.

“Dominant,” Kelsey clarifies. “Not romantically or sexually.”

The constant spinning of my head becomes violent coughing from my lungs. Is Kelsey trying to kill me?

Kelsey giggles. “Sorry. Guess that took you off guard, too.”

“I seriously don’t know where this is all coming from.”

Kelsey takes another sip from her glass and sets it aside. “I don’t go around sharing what I know about my friends’ sexual proclivities, Piper. You know that’s true.”

I nod.

“But in this case—Look, Cam has never been interested in my lifestyle. I took her to a club once when we were in college. She barely spoke to me for three days afterward. I thought she was pissed. It unnerved her. It took a couple of weeks before

we talked about it. She never wanted to go back. But?—”

“But?”

“Aw, shit. It’s hard for Cam. Everyone sees her as this powerful woman who takes charge.”

“Uh—because she is.”

“Yeah. Maybe. At the office—in her work—she is. But not with women, Piper. Cam is super shy. She needs someone to lead in that part of her life—in every department.”

The picture is beginning to come into focus for me. I need another drink.

“She likes you, Piper.”

I move to mix another round of martinis.

“I think you’d be good for her. She’d be good for you.”

I nod.

“Piper?”

My heart is beating a little faster than usual. I’m not sure if it’s because I’m intrigued or uncomfortable. I top off Kelsey’s martini, then fill my glass and sip silently for a minute.

“I stepped in it,” Kelsey says.

“No. I don’t know what to say. And I’m not sure how I feel about this conversation.”

“If I don’t lay it out for you, you’ll never approach Cam.”

“Kelsey, I’m not sure I want to pursue anything with Cameron beyond friendship. Don’t say anything yet. Listen to me. If I ever get involved with someone again, it won’t be based on sex or play.”

“Maybe not. No offense, Piper, that will eventually become an issue. Are you telling me you’re willing to have a completely sexless relationship?”

“No. That isn’t what I’m saying at all.”

“Okay? So, you don’t want to be anyone’s mistress?”

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“I told you. If I have a relationship again, it will be based on wanting more—long term, Kelsey.”

“Like what? Like kids and a house?”

“Maybe.”

“And?”

There isn’t enough liquor in my cabinet to get me through this conversation.

“You can’t change who you are,” Kelsey says. “You aren’t Miss Vanilla 2023.”

I laugh. “That’s an interesting description.”

“You aren’t. You’re always going to want to lead, Piper.”

“Your idea of what that means and mine have never been the same. And I don’t see what this has to do with Cameron.”

“Look, I’ve said a lot already. I’ve never told Cam about you—I mean, she knows you used to belong to the club, but she doesn’t know?—”

“That I dominated people?” I take a long sip from my martini, wishing I’d doused it with more vodka.

“Yes. Cam is—well, I think she craves that, Piper.”

I choke on my martini and cough violently again.

Kelsey giggles. “Some Domme you are.”

I can’t imagine Cameron Kendall submitting to an order to bend over for a spanking. Nor can I imagine Cameron would want to be, much less allow anyone to tie her down. A rush of images flashes through my mind and settles in my core.

Kelsey laughs. “I won’t ask where your thoughts went just now.”

I clear my throat. “Kelsey.”

“Hey. I’m only making a suggestion. What could it hurt to get to know her differently?”

It could hurt a lot. I shake my head.

“Just take her out to dinner or something.”

“Or something?” I ask.

“Come on, Piper. Cam is awesome. She deserves to find someone who is just as awesome.”

“Thanks, I think.”

“Maybe nothing will develop between you. Maybe it will. Just think about it.”

I lift my glass and force myself to smile. Thanks to Kelsey, I doubt I’ll have much choice. Looks like I’ll be buying more vodka.

Dear. God. Heaven. Hell. Jesus. Holy. Fuck. Cameron Kendall is gorgeous. It's not like I haven't always recognized how attractive she is, but I feel something shift dramatically as I watch her make her way to me.

Cameron reaches the bar and smiles. "Hi."

"Hi, Cam."

"I'm glad you called."

"Are you?" I ask.

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Cameron nods as she takes a seat on the barstool beside me. “Sorry. I’m out of practice.”

“Out of practice?”

She nods again. She’s adorable. “Would that be with speaking or sitting?” I ask.

Cameron laughs. “Probably both right about now.”

I cover her hand with mine and squeeze. “What’s your poison?” I ask. “Do you prefer sweet, salty, or smokey?”

“You decide,” she says.

I smile. “Dirty martini, it is.”

“Piper? I hope Kelsey didn’t force you to call me or something. She’s always trying to play matchmaker.”

“No one forces me to do anything,” I say. I can tell by how Cameron shifts on her stool that she’s nervous. “Cam?”

“Sorry.”

“We’ve known each other for years,” I tell her. “You don’t need to be nervous.”

“I’m sorry, Piper. I haven’t been on a date in a year. And it’s been longer than that

since I went out with someone I was genuinely excited about.”

Cameron’s admission surprises me. “Why don’t we have a drink and head back to your place?” I giggle at the blush creeping up Cameron’s neck. “Just to talk,” I say. “Freely.”

“Just to talk, huh?”

I watch her mouth form the words and fight back the urge to taste the martini on her tongue. Shit. “To talk.”

“Cam? What has Kelsey told you about me?”

Cameron shrugs. “I know you are part of their community.”

“I was for a long time.”

“Sometimes, I don’t think Kelsey understands me,” she says.

“Welcome to the club.”

Cameron grins. “I couldn’t do that.”

I look at her curiously.

“Call someone my master,” Cameron says. “I just—I don’t think I could do that. The only dungeon I can picture Caleb mastering is one full of toy dragons—or maybe virtual ones in their living room.”

I laugh so hard I snort. Caleb resembles the stereotype. My older sister was addicted to John Hughes’ movies. I can picture Caleb with a bra on his head, trying to make

the perfect woman—or attempting to train imaginary dragons.

“Sorry,” Cam says.

“Don’t be. I haven’t laughed that hard in a long time.”

Cameron’s shy smile unexpectedly tugs at my belly. I’ve always enjoyed being around her—listening to her talk about her work and her misadventures with Kelsey when they were kids. She possesses an innocence that surprises me.

Cameron sighs. “She calls Caleb, sir. I don’t know, Piper. Kelsey is like the instruction manual I didn’t ask to read. Do you know what I mean?”

I lift a brow.

“If you pursue something, Cam, expect to call her ma’am or some honorific. Come to think of it, maybe she’s more like a warning label,” Cameron says.

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I bite back a grin. I admit I was skeptical about pursuing anything beyond friendship with Cameron. My skepticism shifts toward interest with each passing moment.

She shakes her head. “I’ve called one person ma’am in my life—my great-grandmother in Georgia. She was about a hundred and fifty and mean.”

I shouldn’t laugh, but I can’t help myself. My God, she’s endearing. “I’m sorry, Cam. Listen, I like you. I’m not about to pressure you into a romantic or sexual relationship. I’m not Caleb, and you aren’t Kelsey. I don’t have a hidden dungeon I plan to throw you into, and I may be older, but I have a few years before I can move into the over-fifty-five community.”

Cameron giggles and blushes.

“I know Kelsey is your best friend. And it’s understandable she’s shared things about her relationship and her experiences with you. But she shouldn’t assume that my situation is parallel to hers.”

“I’m so sorry, Piper. It’s weird.”

“Talking to me is weird?”

“No. Not talking to you—talking to you about this. I never imagined we’d talk about this if we ever went out.”

“Did you imagine us going out?”

“Sure.”

My face must show my genuine surprise because Cameron chuckles.

“I’ve liked you for a long time,” Cameron tells me.

“Why didn’t you say something?”

“I’m not good at that,” she tells me. “Men ask me out all the time. They tend to be obnoxious.”

My gaze narrows.

“I don’t think they see me,” Cameron says. “More like who they think I am. Do you know what I mean?”

“I think so.”

“And I can’t be myself with someone like that. With men, it’s like they try to seduce me because it’s a conquest—something to prove. And women? They flirt and wait for me to take the lead.”

“You don’t need to explain,” I tell her. “I think I see the picture.” I take a deep breath. It’s strange for people not in my lifestyle to have conversations about sex—to establish interests and limits with someone before they enter an intimate relationship. I wish I knew what Kelsey told Cameron about me. “Something Kelsey told you has made you uncomfortable.”

“Contracts.”

“Contracts?”

“Yeah. That we might need a contract.”

I groan. We haven’t even had a proper date. “Kelsey,” I mumble.

“I think she just wanted me to be aware of?—”

I hold up a hand. “We might as well have a candid conversation since Kelsey has apparently opened the genie’s bottle.” I’ve learned over the years that once you let a genie out of the bottle, it’s impossible to stuff her back inside. “This isn’t what I envisioned for tonight. We’ve been friends for years, Cam. I’ll be honest. I never considered you as anything more than that.”

Cameron nods sadly.

“That’s because you’re Kelsey’s best friend. And frankly, you come across as someone who likes maintaining control.”

“Yeah. I’ve heard that before. People either expect me to be in control of everything, or they get off on trying to prove they can break me. That applies to every part of my life.” Cameron looks down.

“Not for me,” I tell her, and she looks up at me. “I think you have the idea being with me would mirror Kelsey’s relationship with Caleb.”

Cameron bites her lip.

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“I’ve done that,” I confess. “Been someone’s mistress, Cam. That was a long time ago.”

“Why did you stop?”

“I was in a relationship for a few years that went south. It hurt. I can’t tell you it changes who I am. But it did alter how I view my life and relationships. I want a meaningful relationship with someone willing to know me—all of me.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“It’s just—you’re so sweet,” Cameron says.

The affection and sincerity that color her voice warm me from the inside. “And you don’t think a dominant person can be sweet?”

She blushes and shrugs. “Caleb can be sweet with Kelsey. But he’s?—”

“Caleb is a dude,” I say.

Cameron chuckles.

“Cam, I have to tell you—it surprises me you’re interested in me.”

“Why?”

“I never got that vibe.”

“I’m not good at vibing.”

I can’t help but laugh.

“See what I mean?” Cameron asks. “It’s hard for me, Piper—letting anyone close to me—romantically.” She takes a deep breath. “Or?—”

“Sexually,” I say.

Cameron blushes and nods.

“I understand.”

“You do?”

“Probably better than you think I can. Yes,” I tell her.

“This is not me,” Cameron says. “Talking about this to you before we’ve even kissed—it’s, well?—”

“Awkward?”

“Yes.”

“If Kelsey hadn’t said something to both of us, we wouldn’t have this conversation—at least, not for a while. I’m not Caleb. And you aren’t Kelsey,” I remind Cameron. Looking at Cameron so vulnerable, hopeful, but unsure stirs something profound within me. I see what Kelsey was trying to explain to me. Cameron needs someone who will lead a relationship. It shouldn’t surprise me when I

think about it. In the past, I might have noticed it sooner. I've avoided romantic and sexual entanglements for a long time. That ends today. "It helps to know," I tell her, "Where you stand with someone before you become intimate. I would dare say it would be helpful to any couple, no matter what they desire from a relationship. Cameron?" I smile inwardly at her reluctance to meet my gaze. "Look at me." I wait for her eyes to lift to mine and continue. "We don't need to pursue this discussion tonight. We don't need to discuss this again if it makes you uncomfortable. Kelsey and Caleb's relationship began differently. He guided her into her role as a submissive before their relationship became romantic."

"I know."

"And that isn't what I hope for us."

Cameron's smile tugs my heart unexpectedly.

"I'd like to see if something develops between us," I admit. "I don't think I realized until tonight how much I would like to pursue something beyond friendship with you. But I also don't want to lose our friendship."

"I don't want that, either, Piper. And I am sorry if I don't seem like myself tonight. It's—Kelsey spent yesterday afternoon educating me."

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I roll my eyes. “Kelsey should have a little more faith in both of us. Let’s set aside everything Kelsey has told you about her relationship or me. Let me clear a few things up right now. I spent three years in a relationship with someone who enjoyed being my submissive—and not only in the bedroom. And I enjoyed our relationship. It hurt when it ended. To be honest, I didn’t see the end coming at all. It took another year before I was intimate with anyone again.”

“That would be Erin.”

I nod. “Erin liked to take charge. I’m not sure what Kelsey has told you or explained to you. I’m comfortable switching roles. There came a time when Erin wasn’t comfortable with that dynamic. She’d say we didn’t communicate well. I saw it differently.”

“How so?” Cameron asks.

“I felt she misled me—deliberately.”

“Shit. I’m sorry, Piper. I could tell how much you cared for her.”

“I did. I pulled myself away from the lifestyle, Cam. Look, I’d like us to spend time together—with open minds. And I hope you feel you can talk to me about anything—even if nothing happens between us.”

“And if it does?”

I smile at her. “Then we’ll talk about what that looks like. Let’s not jump to the finish

line when we haven't even started."

"Piper?"

"Yeah?"

"I hope we get there—to the finish line."

My heart speeds at her words. I steady myself and wink at her. "Good to know."

Two

CAMERON

A month ago, the thought that I would be dating Piper Morgan seemed absurd. Now, the best part of my day is the text messages Piper sends—unless I get to see her. I've never known anyone quite like Piper. And I've never missed anyone like I miss her when we're apart. We've spent weeks getting to know each other differently, as Kelsey would say. We talk about our days, families, jobs, and things that interest us. We have spoken a little about Piper's past and mine. And Piper has taken the time to explain many of the things Kelsey talks about that make me zone out. Piper has a unique way of putting me at ease about everything. We both know our relationship will take another right turn—right into the bedroom. To be sure we understand each other, she gave me a list of things to consider—bedroom kind of things. I expected to be embarrassed. But Piper explained it over a delicious dinner she cooked for me on Sunday. She said to think of the list as exploring cuisine. I'm supposed to let her know what is off the menu, what I might like to taste as an appetizer, and what I want to be served as my main course. I laughed. She's amazing. I haven't let her in on my secret yet. I'm falling in love with her—hard and fast. Being with Piper is equal parts thrilling and comforting. I look down at my phone.

I just had a male doctor try to give me a lesson in vaginas. Vaginas, Cam. Does he think I need lessons?

I laugh. Cameron has a management meeting today at the main hospital on her campus. I text her back.

Are you getting certified in vagina management?

Less than a beat later, my phone dings.

I could give him a few lessons in management and vaginas. He may be helpless in the management of vaginas.

I giggle at her reply. The next message makes my heart beat a little faster.

I can't wait to see you later.

Piper.

Me, too.

"Cam?"

I look up to see my assistant, Sheila, standing in the doorway of my office.

"Sorry," I say.

"For smiling?"

"For being distracted today."

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“Let me guess—Piper?”

I feel the corners of my mouth curling into a smile.

“You’ve been spending a lot of time with her,” Sheila says.

“I guess I have.”

“I’m happy for you, Cam. Piper is terrific.”

Yes. She is.

“I haven’t heard you mention Kelsey much,” Sheila says.

I sigh.

“Avoiding her?” she asks.

“Maybe. I love Kels, but I kind of want this time for me and Piper. You know Kelsey. She’ll want details, and then she’ll want to tell me her thoughts about everything.”

“Cam, you know Kelsey loves you more than anyone.”

I shake my head.

“She does,” Sheila says. “You’re the person who has always kept Kelsey from becoming reckless—with everything in life.”

“Honestly, Sheila, if that’s true, I don’t know why she insists on trying to convince me I should follow in her footsteps.”

“Can I say something?”

Sheila is more than my assistant. In many ways, I’ve grown closer to her than I am to Kelsey. We’ve worked together for eight years. I bounce ideas and issues off her all day long. She went to high school with me and Kelsey. I haven’t spent a lot of time thinking about it, but Sheila knows me better than almost anyone. If I’m honest, she hasn’t been an assistant for years. I count on her honesty and her ideas. She didn’t like the last woman I dated. She never said that. I could tell. But she adores Piper.

“Sure,” I say.

“Don’t worry about Kelsey right now. Concentrate on you and Piper, Cam. I see the way you light up when she calls.”

“Do I?”

“More than I’ve ever seen. You’re in love with her.”

The words hit me like a brick.

“Aren’t you?” she asks.

“I think I could be.”

Sheila laughs.

“Why is that funny?” I wonder.

“It’s not. You make me giggle sometimes. I get it. You’ve always been careful. Don’t be too careful this time,” Sheila says.

My gaze narrows.

“Let yourself be happy, Cam.”

“You like Piper.”

“Who wouldn’t like Piper? I also like the way she affects you.”

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“Oh?”

“Don’t let anything Kelsey says or does rain on your happiness,” Sheila says.

I nod.

“Big plans tonight?” Sheila asks.

“I’m not sure what Piper has planned.”

Sheila bites back a grin.

“Stop it.” I laugh. “I know we have dinner plans. That’s all she’s told me.”

“Nervous?”

Am I nervous? I am. “Is it obvious?”

“Cam, I don’t want to overstep. Piper is clearly crazy about you. I don’t think you need to worry.”

I sigh again.

“Is this about Piper’s past at the club?”

“Yes and no,” I reply.

“Don’t let anything Kelsey has told you get between you and Piper.”

“You sound like Piper.”

“Well, Piper strikes me as pretty smart. And, like I said, she’s crazy about you. Listen to her, not to Kelsey.”

“Solid advice,” I say. “My turn.”

“Your turn?”

“To ask you something.”

“Go ahead,” Sheila says. “You know me. I’m an open book.”

“It’s just—I don’t think our night will end with soft kisses.”

Sheila nods and reaches over to squeeze my hand. “I think Piper might surprise you, Cam.”

“Piper surprises me constantly.”

“Do you trust her?”

“More than I’ve ever trusted anyone.”

Sheila smiles broadly. “Do you realize what you just said?”

I chuckle uncomfortably.

“It’s great,” Sheila says. “Let it be great. Don’t try to put it in order, Cameron. Let it

happen.”

“I’m not sure she’ll give me much choice.”

Sheila’s howl of laughter takes me by surprise, and I giggle.

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“Sounds like exactly what you need.”

Yeah. It does.

“How did you discover this place?” I ask Piper.

“Dr. Davidson’s brother-in-law opened it last year.”

“I seriously think this is the best Mexican food I’ve ever had.”

Piper beams. “I hoped you’d like it.”

“The food is amazing. The company is even better,” I tell her. I could be wrong, but I think I see the hint of a blush to her cheeks.

“I feel the same way,” Piper says. She takes a deep breath and exhales slowly. “So? What’s new at work?”

“Nothing,” I reply.

“Nothing? Cam, you have an amazing portfolio of clients.”

True. I do. “Sometimes, Piper, it gets old. I loved building the business. It was a constant challenge. I don’t know. Lately, I feel like I need to stretch a little. Maybe look into something new.”

“Do you mean like investing in a new company?”

“I’ve invested in plenty of companies,” I tell her. “Financially. I don’t know what I want to do. There’s always interest in my company—people who want to acquire it or who are determined to convince me to accept a merger.”

“But?”

“My team is like family. I worry about them. Speaking of my team.”

Piper lifts her brow.

“Sheila was singing your praises earlier.”

“Well, now that’s an accomplishment.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“I managed to get your assistant singing my praises before her boss.”

I stare at her. Piper winks, and I laugh. “You know what they say about songwriting, Piper.”

“No.”

“The best melodies require collaboration.”

It’s Piper’s turn to stare at me. It only takes a second before her laughter fills the restaurant.

“Do you know what I think, Cam?”

“No. What do you think, Piper?”

Piper leans in close. "I think it's time to pay the bill so we can move to the dessert portion of our evening."

My heart races as I contemplate her plans for us. Our relationship has been a slow burn, filled with playful banter over texts and late-night conversations, sneaking kisses and snuggles. But tonight will be different—we both know it. Every moment we spend together makes it harder to leave without feeling her touch or holding her close. I have already opened up to Piper in ways I never thought possible. I sip my sangria, trying to quell the excitement bubbling inside me. She grins knowingly, her eyes shining mischievously, tempting me to push aside my drink and call for the check. Piper beats me to the punch.

"Check, please," she tells our waitress.

I guess it's time for dessert.

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I find it difficult to breathe when I step into Piper's house. It's been longer than I want to examine since I've felt the ache of anticipation and desire. She tosses her keys onto the kitchen counter and turns to look at me. Her smile is soft and understanding, and my belly flutters. It's nearly impossible to imagine Piper taking a commanding role. She's charming and caring. I've enjoyed the time we've spent together this month. The idea of brokering a relationship unsettles me. It's one of the reasons I've never tried to immerse myself in Kelsey's world. Aside from the fact that the club scene—any club scene—holds little appeal for me, I'm uncomfortable and turned off at the idea of making a formal agreement with a lover. Terms are meant for business contracts, not love and sex. Piper strides toward me confidently.

"Cameron?" she asks.

"I'm sorry, Piper."

"If you'd prefer, we can share a bottle of wine and talk."

I exhale and shake my head.

"This is new to you," she says.

"Yes."

"And that makes it uncomfortable."

"Yes."

Piper's hands lift to hold my face, and she softly brings her lips to mine. "It's normal," she tells me. "To feel unsure."

I sigh.

"And it's a feeling you're unaccustomed to having," Piper says. "Always in control for everyone. You're the foundation for everyone around you."

I couldn't have said it better myself. I've tried to be open with Piper about my feelings. When my desires become a topic, I struggle to voice my thoughts. She's listened to everything I've said.

"Can I ask you something?" Piper requests.

I nod.

"Do you think desiring someone to lead makes you weak?"

I look at my feet. "I don't know."

"Do you think it makes me feel less for you?"

My head snaps to attention.

Piper smiles. "Cam," she says. "I wouldn't have brought you here unless I felt something for you. Nothing that happens between us will ever be done to hurt you. Nothing."

"I know."

"I'm not Kelsey," Piper says.

“I know that, too.”

“Let’s start slow.”

I thought a month of shared dinners, late-night conversations, coffee dates, and a few kisses qualified as slow. Piper seems to follow my train of thought. She giggles and kisses me.

“I’m not your mistress,” Piper tells me. “That works for Kelsey and Caleb. It doesn’t need to be part of our dynamic. I’ve done that. It worked for me until it didn’t, and I don’t think it will work for us. That doesn’t mean I can’t be dominant.”

The flutter of my heart surprises me, and I feel my face flush.

“Cam?”

I nod.

“I know it was hard for you—to let me know what you want to explore and your limits. I listen to everything you say. I understand that to you, what’s developing between us feels like an arrangement rather than a relationship. That’s not true. It’s just a form of communication—ensuring we both have clarity. There’s so much for us to discover together. I promise it won’t remove the mystery you crave.”

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Mystery? My face must show my confusion because Piper laughs.

“We all need a little mystery in our relationships—in the bedroom. It’s always about discovery. It also needs to be safe, Cam.”

I nod again.

“Take off your coat, Cameron.”

Piper’s voice is authoritative, and I comply. She takes my coat and drapes it over a chair. “Do you know what I want?” she asks me.

“No.”

“I want you to let go of everything tonight—to me.”

I hear myself gulp. How embarrassing.

“Come with me,” Piper says.

I dumbly follow her, expecting to land in her bed. She leads me into her spacious living room. I watch as Piper sits in a plush chair in front of a massive picture window. She crosses her legs and appraises me. “Take off your clothes, Cameron.”

I freeze. Piper’s gaze pins me in place. She says nothing and arches a dark brow. My heart thunders, and I feel an unfamiliar flutter of excitement spread from my core to my clit. I remind myself to inhale and exhale as I awkwardly begin to disrobe.

“You are beautiful,” Piper says. “Keep going, Cameron. I’m tired of imagining what lies beneath those sweaters that cling to you.”

Her compliment sparks a newfound surge of confidence. I rid my body of my sweater and unbutton my jeans. I unzip them slowly and slide them down my legs.

“Everything,” Piper purrs.

I unhook my bra, slide out of my underwear, and blush under the heat of Piper's gaze.

"Do you feel embarrassed?" she asks.

"Yes."

"We need to work on that. You need to trust me, Cameron. Trust that I will always keep you safe. Do you believe me?"

I nod.

"That's not an answer, Cameron."

I'm unaccustomed to Piper's directness and the way it thrills me.

"Answer me, Cameron."

"I believe you."

"Good. Come to me," Piper says.

I walk to her, hoping to appear graceful even as my knees threaten to buckle. Piper's eyes sweep over me as I approach.

"Tell me, Cameron, what do you want right now? Do you want me to touch you, or do you want to touch me?"

I don't need to ponder her question, but don't respond. I'm too afraid to hear Piper's response. I'm too scared to verbalize my desire.

"Cameron. Tell me."

I breathe, and then I speak. "I want to touch you."

Piper smiles. "Kneel on the floor in front of me, Cameron."

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I follow Piper's instructions and then wait to see what she will do. It doesn't take long for me to get my answer. Piper stands and sheds her clothing, piece by piece, in front of me. Jesus. She is gorgeous—all curves in the perfect places. Her full breasts and hips make my mouth water. I desperately want to suck her nipples. I'm unsure how she knows what I'm thinking, but her eyes suggest she's heard my private thought—unless I said it aloud, which would be mortifying. Piper's lips curl at the corners, and her eyes widen. It's an expression I'm confident I will see again. She sits back on the chair, spreads her legs, and crooks her finger, beckoning me to kneel between her thighs. I tremble as I go to her, insecurity, lust, and a spark of fear flooding my veins. Her lips meet mine tenderly, gently reassuring me, and my fear fades, excited anticipation replacing it with each brush of her tongue.

She pulls back, and I feel the loss acutely. She takes my hands and places them on her breasts. I knead them gently at first, relishing the feel of her flesh in my hands. Her eyes stay with mine as I tease her. I take her nipples between my thumbs and forefingers and roll them, causing Piper to moan and arch her back. Excitement throbs in my center and coils in my belly as I dip my head to suck the pebbled flesh.

“Fuck, Cameron. You feel amazing. Just like that. Keep sucking them.”

Piper's praise and direction register in all my nerve endings. I swirl my tongue around her left nipple and tease her right with my fingers, pulling at it slightly. I moan when I feel her arch into me.

“That's right,” Piper says. “Are you wet, Cameron?”

Piper's words stop my heart for a second and send a jolt through my entire body. No

one has ever been so direct with me. I suck greedily on her nipple in reply.

Piper pushes me away. “That’s not an answer, Cameron.”

I struggle to meet her gaze.

“I was enjoying that,” Piper says.

I swallow hard.

“I asked you a question. Are you wet for me?” Piper asks.

Wet? I might drown if she continues this seduction. I shift nervously and feel her thighs close to hold me steady.

“Cameron,” Piper says. “Look at me. Right now.”

I lift my eyes to hers.

“Are. You. Wet?”

I try to speak, but no sound comes out. Have I gone mute?

“I would check for myself,” Piper says. “But that won’t establish trust.”

“I trust you.”

Piper nods. “You don’t trust yourself, Cameron. If you want to touch me, you will answer the question.”

“Yes,” I say.

“Yes? Yes, what?”

“Yes. I’m wet.” The words register as a warm rush between my thighs.

“That wasn’t so hard, was it?” she asks.

Hard? I’ve secured multi-million-dollar contracts that produced less stress. Piper smiles at me. I look at her hopefully, asking for permission without words.

“What do you want to ask me?” Piper asks.

“I want—Can I touch you? Please?”

Piper places my hands on her breasts. “You may.”

I lick my lips.

“Yes?” Piper asks.

“Will you let me taste you?” Did I just say that?

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“I will tell you when you can bring me that pleasure, Cameron. Not until I tell you. Finish what you started.”

I return to bathing her nipples with my mouth and tugging them between my fingertips. Piper’s skin is soft and warm under my hands. She grasps my fingers and twists her nipple to meet my lips. I lick at her and suck her hard. She moans and tugs harder at her nipple. I moan loudly, sure that I will come before I have a chance to bring her pleasure.

“I can’t wait to touch you,” Piper says.

I feel Piper’s legs fall apart and remind myself she hasn’t invited me to taste her.

“I want to feel your tongue on me, Cameron.”

I don’t require a second invitation. My tongue snakes between her cleavage, over her belly, and to her thigh. I settle between her legs and lick her steadily, tracing her center before flattening my tongue over her clit. Piper’s hips buck, but it’s mewwho moans. I’ve never wanted anything so much—more than feeling Piper touch me; I want to bring her pleasure—make her writhe and hear her voice her appreciation.

“So good, Cameron. Keep going. Don’t stop until I come for you. Just like that.”

My neck strains, and my knees ache, but I wouldn’t give up this prize for anything. It’s sweeter than anything I’ve tasted and more thrilling than anything I’ve experienced. Her hands clutch my hair, and her hips buck wildly.

"Cameron." My name falls from her lips urgently. "Fuck."

I hold onto her hips as her orgasm pulls her under, continuing to tease her center until she pulls me up to face her. Her lips meet mine more tenderly than I expect.

"Cameron," she says.

As she speaks my name, I know I could fall in love with Piper. I cling to her.

"Shh," she says. "It's all right."

"Piper." I want her so much it hurts.

"It's all right, Cameron." Piper holds me close and kisses my temple. "I told you we'll start slowly. I want to touch you."

I nod against her. I need her to lead. I can't form any thoughts as feelings roll through me.

Piper pushes me back, pulls me up, and leads me to the sofa. "Lie down, Cam."

I follow her instructions.

"Beautiful," she says, and she hovers over me. "Tonight, we take things softly."

I don't know if I am relieved or disappointed. Maybe both.

"Tonight," she says. "Trust me. I want to discover you—everything that unfolds your desires." Piper kisses me before dropping her mouth to my breast. "This isn't a movie, Cam. It's not a story. This is the beginning of us."

Piper's words wash over me, warming me from the inside out.

"If you let me, I will take you to all the places you're still afraid to tell me you want to explore. One at a time. If that's what you want."

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes, I want that."

Piper nips my neck. "Good. Because I will push you, Cameron, push you out of your comfort zone. I will reveal you—not for me—for you."

It feels as if Piper's hands are everywhere. I can barely breathe as her tongue sucks tenderly on my nipples. "Piper?"

"Yes, Cam?"

"I want," my thought dies on my lips.

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“Tell me,” Piper demands, a hint of seduction in her voice. She slips a finger inside me.

“With you,” I reply, unable to form coherent thoughts as she continues to move inside me.

Piper’s thrusts become more forceful, causing me to lose myself in the blissful sensations. “Tell me,” she commands again, driving me to the edge of ecstasy.

“I want you to touch me,” I finally confess, my body trembling with anticipation.

“I am touching you.”

Piper’s touch is electrifying as she trails her tongue down my neck and over my chest, stopping at my nipples. I moan as she teases them with delicate flicks of her tongue, each one causing me to arch further into her embrace. She moves lower, trailing kisses down my stomach until it finally reaches my core. Her tongue dances across my sensitive skin as her fingers continue to curl inside me. My fingers tangle in the waves of her hair. The pleasure is overwhelming, pushing me closer and closer to the edge. “Piper. Please.”

“Please, what?”

Piper brings me to the brink repeatedly, driving me wild with desire.

“Please. Piper. Please.”

“Ask me, Cam.”

Piper reaches a hand to my breast and squeezes my nipple, and I come undone.

“Jesus! Please let me come, Piper. Please.”

She looks up at me, her eyes intense with desire. As her fingers delve deeper inside me, her tongue swirls and flicks tirelessly. My body responds like a dormant volcano suddenly awakened after centuries of stillness.

“Breathe, Cameron.” Piper holds me close. “We should get you someplace warmer.”

Warmer? I’m sure my temperature would overload a thermometer right now. “I’m warm.”

Piper laughs. “You’ll be warmer under the covers in my bed.”

I don’t want to let her go. “Can we stay here for a few more minutes?”

“Of course.”

“Piper?”

“Yes?”

“I feel,” I try to find the words to explain what I’m thinking, but I can’t find them. My mind returns to the checklist Piper gave me to fill out and how my body reacted. My breath stops and starts in fits, and I tense beside her.

Piper pulls back and looks at me. She doesn’t seem surprised by my thoughts or my inability to voice them. She sweeps some hair from my eyes and smiles. “I don’t

know where this will lead us, Cam. I feel something for you—something I think could be the beginning of a long-term relationship. You're used to being in control all the time. It's hard to let go of that control."

I sigh.

"Talk to me."

"It makes me feel inadequate."

"Being submissive?"

"Yes."

"It shouldn't," Piper says. She sits up and brings me with her. "My days are out of my control, Cam. I think that could be said about much of my life. It's not easy for me to become aroused if I feel out of control. Many of my friends don't understand. They think I am always in control. My job demands I remain calm and focused, but I'm never in control of outcomes. Being dominant in the bedroom is a contrast to my life outside these walls. I haven't had a lover in two years—for more reasons than I can count. There is vulnerability for me, too. I never want to hurt you—reveal you, guide you, arouse you, love you—but never hurt you."

My brow furrows.

"That's part of your fear, isn't it?" Piper asks me.

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I shake my head, unsure what she means.

“You are afraid falling in love is impossible if we explore and push boundaries.”

Tears prickle my eyes.

“I know,” she says.

“You do?”

“Of course, I know. I’ve had those same fears, Cam.”

“But I don’t think I can be submissive all the time, Piper. I don’t want a lover to tell me when I can eat or what I need to wear to work.”

Piper takes a deep breath. “I don’t know what Kelsey has told you. I had a partner who enjoyed being completely submissive. We never crossed into master/slave territory. She liked me to choose her outfits for work and organize her life. And that included ordering for her at restaurants—things like that. I enjoyed our time together, Cam. It evolved over time, and it worked for us for a few years. I don’t expect that from you, and I’m not sure that’s something I would ever want to do again.”

I nod. “It’s,” I struggle to form words.

“Cam, you need to be able to talk to me about anything.”

“It’s hard for me to talk about things.”

“I know it is, but I promise, nothing you say will make me cringe.”

I giggle. “It took me the entire weekend to complete that checklist,” I say. “Some of it made me—well it?”

“Excites you.”

“Yes.”

“And that made you uncomfortable.”

“I guess. Some things I didn’t expect to interest me—or maybe I should say I don’t think it should excite me. Sometimes, I envy Kelsey.”

Piper kisses me. “Baby steps,” she says. “We’ll never be Kelsey and Caleb. Some things will surprise you in the best ways, and others will unsettle you. There’s no wrong way to feel. I won’t be disappointed or offended by anything you desire or tell me you want to set aside. We all have limits, Cam.”

“Kelsey keeps telling me I should come to the club.”

“It’s been years since I spent time at the clubs.”

“But you have gone to them,” I say.

“I have, and I’ve enjoyed the experience.”

I sigh.

“I don’t expect to do that with you. And if I can tell you the truth, I’m not sure I want to experience that with you. And unless we decide to change our dynamic, I’m Piper,

and you're Cam. Okay?"

I look at Piper curiously, wondering if she doesn't want to visit the club because of my inexperience.

"I feel something for you," Piper says. "Deep down. I think I need to make something clear."

"What?"

"Maybe—maybe one day when we are comfortable with each other, when we've learned more about each other, and we trust what's between us completely—maybe then, if we both want to experience something at a club, we will try. But I don't want our relationship to be all about play, Cam. I loved tonight. I also want to make love with you. Slowly."

The smile on my face makes its way from my toes. I know I could fall in love with Piper. The biggest part of me hopes she will fall in love with me. "I'm sorry if I'm clumsy."

"Not at all," Piper assures me. "Now, let's go someplace more comfortable. I'll get us some water. You take your time, shower if you'd like, or climb into bed."

“Piper? Thanks.”

Piper leans close and kisses me. “Thank you, Cam—for giving me a chance.”

Three

PIPER

The door opens, and I hold my breath. Cameron walks into the kitchen. She becomes more beautiful to me each time I see her. I haven’t spoken the words yet, but I’m in love with her. Head over heels—the kind of love that makes your heart clench and your pulse race. And I desire her. More than I have ever wanted anyone. “Cam.”

Cameron spins to face me. “Hi.”

My eyes sweep over her. I missed her the last two days. I’ve been gentle with her, discovering her limits slowly. A few weeks ago, she wrote me a note expressing a fantasy I’ve been waiting to fulfill. I watch her take off her coat and drape it over a chair. “Don’t stop there,” I tell her. She looks confused. “Take the rest of it off.”

Cameron’s breath hitches.

“Now, Cameron. I want to watch you undress.”

Cameron’s face flushes pink, but she complies with my direction. I can almost hear her heart beating from across the room. I sit on one of the bar stools and force myself not to lick my lips. “Why do you look embarrassed?” I ask.

Cameron falters.

“Cameron? Tell me.”

“I’m not sure,” she says.

“Not good enough.”

“I feel exposed.”

I nod. “I want you exposed—to me.”

Cameron shimmies out of her skirt, and I suppress a moan. She’s standing in a black bra and lacy underwear that accentuate her curves. I had intended to make her strip naked. She looks so sexy I change my mind. “Walk to me.”

Cameron comes to me slowly, almost hesitantly. I see both anticipation and uncertainty in her eyes. I place my hands on her hips and kiss her softly. “You are beautiful.” I hear her moan and grin inwardly. I run my hands slowly up her sides over the curve of her breasts and down again and watch her eyelids flutter. Standing between my legs gives me perfect access to kiss the swell of her breasts. “So soft, Cam. You’re so soft.”

“Piper.”

“Mm. I’m going to fuck you over and over again, Cameron.”

She gasps at my words. I’ve never spoken to her this way. I want to give her something I know she needs tonight—something we’ve both been waiting for. “You’re to remain silent unless I direct you to speak, or I ask you a question. Do you understand?”

She nods.

“Not good enough, Cameron.”

“Yes. I understand.”

“Good.”

Her breath hitches. I pull her to me and kiss her soundly. “You’re not to touch me unless I direct you to. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” I thumb her nipples through her bra and watch as her lips part. “Needy already?” I ask.

“Yes.”

I lower my mouth and tease her right nipple with my teeth through the fabric.

“Oh, God.”

I pull back. “Did I ask you something?”

“No.”

My gaze pins her in place. “Go to the bedroom, Cameron. Get on the bed.” She looks mildly afraid. I remain stoic. We’ve discussed how these scenes might unfold. I also know talking about something is not the same as experiencing it. Looking at Cameron, I fall deeper in love. This is the first of many bridges we’ve yet to cross. It’s not meant to test her trust in me, but it will—I know that, too. My eyes stay with hers. “Now, Cam. Get on the bed. On your knees and elbows. Face the wall.” I place my hand over her heart and feel the thumping. “Cameron.”

She sucks in a shaky breath and pulls away from me. I’m relieved when she turns down the hallway. I need a moment to gather myself. I’ve played the dominant role for more than one person. As I steady my breathing, I realize I’ve never been in love with any of them—not the way I love Cameron. It takes me by surprise. She needs this more than I do. But I need it, too—to feel her submit to me, to put all her trust in me to care for her because that’s what I want more than anything—to care for Cameron. It takes me a few minutes to steady myself. I grab two bottles of water before heading to the bedroom. Cameron is spread out on my bed exactly as I envisioned. I move behind her and caress her backside. “Beautiful,” I tell her. “And unsure.” I place the bottles on the bedside table.

She tenses.

I kiss the small of her back and step away to undress. “You left me a note last week,” I say. I see her back arch and smile. She realizes what is about to happen. “I read it. Over and over.” I finish undressing and pull a strap-on out of my closet. I secure it around my waist and move closer to her. Cameron’s breathing is already labored. I climb onto the bed behind her and press myself against her until she gasps. I can tell her excitement competes with anxiety. I crawl up beside her and kiss her cheek. “Give me a safe word, Cameron.” She flinches. “Cam?”

“Basil.”

I chuckle. Cameron is constantly complaining I use too much basil when I cook. “Basil it is. You can use that word at any time, Cam. You need to know it won’t upset me if you use it—no matter what. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

I pull her face toward me. The raw vulnerability and emotion in her eyes tempt me to speak my truth. I hold back. For now. “Cameron, do you understand me?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” I murmur against her lips before stepping back. “Stay just like that,” I command softly, my eyes tracing every curve of her body. My fingers lightly glide over her spine, eliciting a sigh from her. I move my hand down to her thighs, caressing them before delivering a firm smack. She gasps, and I wait for her response. Her body arches towards me, telling me she wants more. “Your body speaks for you, Cameron.” I brush my lips against the middle of her back as my hands massage her backside. Pulling away, I give her another stinging slap on the opposite cheek. This time, she slips forward and moans. I pull her underwear to the side and tease her with a fingertip, exploring the warmth that greets my touch. I delve deep into her with two fingers, twisting my hand as I retract them slowly. “Do you

think you deserve more, Cameron?”

“Please.”

I thrust my fingers into her deeply. “I know what you desire, Cameron.” I spread the wetness from her center backward, teasing her tight opening with a fingertip. “This is what you want. You were so afraid to tell me you had to leave me a little note.”

She quivers at my words.

“So ashamed to want to be filled,” I say. I tease her asshole while my fingers continue to dive deep inside her. Her hips rock against my hand, seeking more. I take a deep breath, withdraw my fingers, and hop off the bed. I hear Cameron’s faint cry of protest and chuckle. She’ll learn to let go of her embarrassment and tell me what she needs, and I know how to coax it from her. I return to my closet and retrieve a small plug and a bottle of lube I purchased a few days after she left me the note. I can see her straining to hold her position as I return.

“Next time, I’ll cuff you to the bed,” I tell her.

Cameron whimpers. I pull her underwear to her ankles and tease her with the plug, sliding it through her wetness, over her clit, and back again. I drip some lube down her ass and use the plug to tease the opening. “Have you ever done this, Cameron?”

“No.”

My heart expands greater than my desire. It requires an immense degree of trust to give this much intimacy to someone. Cameron is a gentle soul, afraid of her desires and desperate to have someone fulfill them. I’m amazed and awed that she chose me. She tenses with excitement and fear. I tease her clit, circling it gently with my finger. We have so much to discover together. Tonight is another step forward into a bigger

world. “Easy,” I say. I spread her legs and press the tip of my finger against her hole. “Easy,” I tell her.

“Piper?”

“I didn’t tell you to speak, Cam.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Relax,” I say. “It’s all right. Feel me right now. Breathe, Cameron.”

I slow my movement and wait as her muscles relax. Her breathing slows, and her body finally obeys me. I press the plug gently into her. Cameron gasps. I wait until she’s adjusted slightly and press further. I move it deeper, and her moan registers between my legs. “Are you all right?” I ask her.

“Yes,” she pants.

“Good.” I wiggle the plug slightly and smile when she arches to bring it deeper. “Yes,” I hiss. “You fucking want it so bad, Cam. You’re so fucking wet. Jesus.” I circle her clit with a fingertip. I don’t think I’ve ever wanted to fuck someone so badly. My entire body thrums with excitement. Little by little, Cameron’s shyness and apprehension fade as her excitement swells. I reach beside me and pour some lube onto the dildo. I never want to hurt Cameron. People mistake the pleasure of pain with the pain of hurt. It isn’t the same. I position the dildo against her opening and slide the tip inside, and Cameron groans. I slide into her cautiously until she pushes back against me. I set my rhythm steady and deep. Easy, but forceful. She pants and presses back urgently, seeking more, and I wish I knew what it felt like inside her. “Tell me, Cam. Tell me right now what you want.”

“Harder.”

I should have expected that reply. I didn't. I thrust into her forcefully. "Tell me," I demand. "Tell me, Cameron. You want me to fuck you?"

“Yes.”

“Say it.”

“Fuck, Piper. I want you to fuck me. I want you to do everything to me. Oh, God. Fuck.”

I can feel her thighs begin to shake as I continue to drive into her. She meets my thrusts like a ravenous soul waiting to be filled. I grunt and grab her hips.

“Do you need me to touch you to come?” I ask her.

“No.” She cries out.

“You can speak, Cameron.”

“Please, Piper. Please.”

“Please?”

“Don’t stop.”

No force on earth could stop me. "Do you want to come?"

“Yes. Please, Piper. Please.”

Hearing her pleas makes my pulse race. I reach a hand around to pinch her nipple,

and Cameron cries out. I can feel her muscles clamp down and contract around the dildo. I don't stop. I can't. I'm lost in the sound of her cries and the way her body moves into mine. She shudders violently, and I hold her steady, slowing my thrusts as she comes down. I stroke her back and kiss her gently on the shoulder. I pull out of her slowly and gently remove the plug. She quivers, and I guide her down onto the bed. I unfasten the harness, toss it to the floor, and crawl beside her. "Cam."

Cameron reaches up and touches my face. I smile at her, knowing what she longs to say but can't. I kiss her tenderly. "I love you, Cam." She snuggles against me, and I stroke her hair.

"I love you too, Piper."

I kiss her and reach for a water bottle on the bedside table. "Sit," I tell her. I smile when Cameron settles herself against me. "Take a drink." Her hand trembles, and I help her hold the bottle. "Are you hurting anywhere?"

Cameron shakes her head but flinches when she moves.

"Cam?"

"I'm okay, Piper."

"That isn't what I asked you."

She sighs. "It's a little sore." Her voice drops to a whisper. "My ass."

I kiss her temple. "Inside or outside?"

"Outside. Just a little."

“Do you want to take a shower?”

“Only if it’s with you,” she says.

I smile. “Drink a little more while I start the shower,” I tell her.

“Piper?”

“Yes?”

“Did I,” Cameron’s question dies on her lips.

I return to her and pull her into my arms. “I love you, Cam. I love everything about you. Do you know what I love the most?”

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“Please don’t say my dorkdom.”

“Dorkdom?”

“It sounded good in my head.”

I laugh. “I love how sweet and gentle you are,” I say.

“Oh? My begging you to fuck me was sweet and gentle?”

“No. That was sexy.”

Cameron groans.

“And that doesn’t change how sweet and gentle you are, Cam. That’s why it’s so sexy.”

“I liked it,” she whispers.

“Which part?”

“All of it.”

I sweep the hair that falls into her eyes aside.

“You said you love me,” she says.

I take a deep breath. There are many people I love. What I feel for Cameron is so much more. I gaze into her endless blue-green eyes. “I’m in love with you, Cam.”

A smile lights Cameron from within, and she whispers my name. “Piper.”

“I want to share everything with you,” I tell her. The truth of it squeezes my heart. I’ve wanted to give to someone—to have someone take from me, too. Sharing myself—every part of me—I’ve reserved that for someone I love.

“You do?”

“Everything,” I tell her. I need to take a few deep breaths before I continue.

“Piper? Is something wrong?”

“No, Cam. Everything feels right. I need you to know something.”

“I’m listening.”

“When I say I want to share everything with you—I mean all the pieces of myself. I want to laugh with you over dinner and sip coffee at breakfast. And I want to take you places you’ve never been—not only in our bedroom—in the world.” I take a nervous breath.

“But?”

I caress her cheek. “I also want to make love with you. Softly. Just the two of us. I don’t think I’ve ever needed that until now.”

Cameron’s lips touch mine briefly. “Thank you.”

“Why are you thanking me?”

“Because I’d just about given up on finding someone who understands me—who accepts me. I know I’m still—I struggle with feeling embarrassed.”

“And we’ll work on that together.”

“Do you ever feel that way?” she asks.

“Do you mean about sex?”

Cameron nods.

“I used to—a long time ago, not so much now. But I feel unsure sometimes.”

“Really? You’re always so confident.”

I laugh. “There are times when I’m a nervous wreck, Cam.”

“With me?”

“Sometimes.”

“Why?”

“Because I care so much more than I ever have about anyone. And I never want you to doubt that—not for a second.”

Cameron stretches to kiss me. “I’ve never doubted that.”

I nod.

“Something is brewing up there in your head,” she says. “Do you want to tell me?”

“It’s why I stepped away—Kelsey has never understood why.”

“Kelsey can be myopic.”

I snicker.

“Believe me, I know,” Cam says. “I’ve been friends with her since the ninth grade. And there’ve been times that’s messed with my perception of myself.”

“How so?”

Cameron holds onto me as she continues. “Kelsey was always ahead of me—not in school—in life. She was more adventurous where I was focused. She went to parties and stayed all night. Even when I did agree to go with her, my thoughts were always on what I needed to accomplish. She still thinks that means I’m uptight or something—that I don’t know how to have fun. Her idea of fun and mine aren’t always the same. I’m not saying Kelsey has ever been reckless. I calculate risk. It’s not so much because I fear something will fall apart—it’s just that I hold myself accountable if it does. Kelsey shrugs it off. If I’m honest, it surprised me when I learned she liked submitting to Caleb.”

I consider Cameron’s observations without comment.

“What are you thinking?” Cameron asks. “It doesn’t surprise you, does it?”

“Not really—no. People have different reasons for what they need in a relationship—sexually, physically, psychologically, and emotionally. Some people thrive on being in charge; others need someone to take control. Some enjoy role reversal. That’s true of everyone, not just kinky people, Cam. They may not think about it the same way, but it’s true. Many people would never want anyone outside their relationship to know what they enjoy—their roles. Kelsey would tell you that’s because of their shame.”

“And you?”

“It can be. I think more often, it’s privacy.” I chuckle. “Kelsey is an exhibitionist. She gets off on shocking other people—or trying to shock them.”

“True.”

“It doesn’t surprise me that she’s submissive. It keeps her from going off the rails with her adventures—gives someone the reins—if you know what I mean.”

“I don’t think I’m into reins.”

I laugh. “Thanks for letting me know. I’ll return them in the morning.”

Cameron giggles and tightens her hold on me.

“Let me start the shower.”

“I just want to be close to you for a few more minutes.”

“We can stay here as long as you want,” I promise.

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“I might never let you go.”

I hold my breath for a moment and kiss Cameron’s head. “I won’t let you go, Cameron. Not unless you ask me to.” I close my eyes as she settles firmly against me. No. I won’t let her go.

Four

CAMERON

I love being with Piper. It gets harder to leave her every time we’re together. We plan to go to a party at Kelsey’s apartment tonight. I talk to Kelsey daily, but we haven’t seen each other in a few weeks. Something tells me this party is about more than getting some friends together. I’ll bet they’re buying a house. Kelsey has been talking about that for over a year, and I know she and Caleb have been saving for longer than that. I admit it makes me a little nervous—not the idea of Kelsey and Caleb buying property. Kelsey’s guest list sometimes leads to colorful conversation. I like all of Kelsey’s friends. Well, I likemostof them. There is Lila. She’s pursued me relentlessly for a few years. I’ve tried every approach in the book to let her know I’m uninterested. She always smiles and says, we’ll see. There is nothing to see—not for Lila.

“Cameron?”

I look up to find my assistant, Sheila, in the doorway. “Hey. Did I forget about a meeting or something?”

Sheila cringes.

“Uh-oh. I forgot something.”

“No. Jared Bennington called.”

I take a deep breath and exhale it slowly. Jared Bennington is more persistent than Lila. He’s not interested in pursuing me. He is determined to acquire my company.

“What did he want?”

“Oh, something about the best offer you’ll ever get.”

I snort. Maybe he’s Lila’s twin. She’s tried that line on me several times. “Fat chance,” I say.

I grab my phone and text Piper quickly, letting her know I’ll see her at the party later. I hate changing our plans, but I need to handle this Jared Bennington situation. No isn’t a word that seems to be in his vocabulary. I’m tempted to have a stiff drink before I call Jared. If I start now, I’ll need a nap before Kelsey’s party begins. Sheila hands me a file as I grab my coat and head out the door. “Here are the papers you wanted to review for the Dever’s account.”

“Thanks, Sheila. You’re a lifesaver.”

I go to the coffee shop down the street, grab my latte, and find a quiet corner. As I skim through the documents, my mind wanders back to Piper. I can’t wait to see her tonight. I wish it could be a private affair. We had agreed to get ready at her house and head to the party together. I’m startled when my phone buzzes, and I answer with a smile. “Hi.”

“Meet me at the party?” Piper asks.

“I’m sorry, Piper. Jared called—again.”

“Tell him to go fuck himself.”

I laugh. “That probably would be the best offer he’s ever gotten.”

“Cam, do you want to sell the company?”

I’ve considered selling the business and starting something from scratch. I oversee things, but the company runs like clockwork. I was twenty-four when I started my company. Back then, I worked out of a cramped office in an old factory building where the stained ceiling tiles sagged, and the once-soft shag carpets were matted down and crunched under my feet like brittle leaves. But I didn’t care. That tiny corner belonged to me, and I promised myself I’d make enough money to renovate the entire building one day. Seven years later, I made good on my promise. Building something from the ground up appealed to me. Selling the fruits of my labor to Jared Bennington does not.

“You don’t want Jared to have it,” Piper says.

“No.”

“Then you have your answer, and so does he. Cam?”

“It’s a lucrative offer, Piper. If anyone else made it, I’d jump. I don’t trust him with the staff.”

“Let it go for the weekend.”

“Is that an order?” I hear Piper inhale and realize it’s about to become an order.

“Yes,” Piper says. “Pack up and come to the house.”

“Now?”

“Yes.”

“What are you up to?” I ask.

“Let’s just say I plan to make this party interesting for us both.”

My heart races at the sultry tone of Piper’s voice. Jared can fuck himself. “I’m on my way.”

I'm relieved that Piper gave me an escape hatch from dealing with Jared. My interest in selling my company has increased since Piper and I became a couple. She makes me want to be a better version of myself. Not that I have low self-esteem. People assume because I'm a successful businesswoman in my early thirties, I must be driven by a lust for wealth or power. That isn'ttrue. I like a challenge. That much, I'll admit. I've worked hard to grow my company, often at the expense of my personal life. I've tried to give back to the community quietly. I don't like to make appearances or have my name on plaques. To me, that smacks of simply trying to brand myself. When I give money or my time, I believe in a cause. I've kept my company local—not small—local. And I've done my best to employ talent from the area. Local merchants, contractors, artisans, and small businesses put their trust in me as a twenty-something newbie with no real experience to help them become successful. I owe it to them to give back.

I started my career by helping small businesses and independent contractors shape their brand image. I crafted their message for websites and advertisements to logos and letterheads. The bulk of my clientele is still comprised of small businesses and contractors. People might view that as small potatoes. A savvy businessperson knows

that the most prominent corporations depend on small businesses to support them, whether to craft their goods, aid in their services, or complement their supply chain. It's what makes my company attractive to prospective buyers. My talent is understanding something most people fail to recognize. A massive company's brand perception can be altered, even ruined, by aligning with one vendor whose brand becomes tarnished. My success with the "small potatoes" led Fortune 500 companies to hire me to ensure their messaging aligns with their partners'. That's my not-so-secret power. I can see through the exterior of messaging to the heart of intention. Businesses are like people. They wear masks. But companies and people are also different. The objective of any business is simple: be profitable. Some seek to achieve that on a grander scale than others. It's my job to see past the façade of the people who walk into my office. Most enter determined to sell me bullshit narratives they think sound exciting and ethical. I need to listen through the noise and see past the polish to find what a company is all about. What are they willing to compromise to achieve success? That helps me shape their brand. And it allows me to keep their message aligned with anyone they hire or make them attractive so others will hire them.

People have more layers than the biggest corporations who seek help from my firm. I enjoy puzzling over people while I sip a drink at a club or one of Kelsey's parties. It's always frustrated me the way most people look at others through stereotypes. And people stereotype me all the time. Piper isn't like that. I spent years dissecting her at a distance. We were always at a slight distance even when we were engaged in a conversation. She's the most giving and kind person I know. That's the reason I found it hard to imagine her taking a dominant role in a relationship, much less in the bedroom. The more time we spend together, the more it makes sense to me. She always tells me her days are filled with the unknown. She's a trauma nurse in a children's hospital. It takes a toll on her. The weariness pulls at the corners of her eyes. A lot of days, despite her best effort at work, she feels helpless. I think that's part of the reason she prefers to maintain control during intimacy. She's never said that—not directly. I understand her. At least, I think I'm coming to understand her.

As much as I like to study people, Kelsey's parties sometimes unnerve me. This is the first party Kelsey has thrown since Piper and I started dating. And not even Kelsey knows how our relationship has deepened. I've kept that private and so has Piper. I'm in love with Piper. Completely. And I know she loves me. I also trust her more than I ever have another person. I can't begin to express how grateful I am she'll be with me tonight. I also suspect she's planning something—something erotic—something that will push my limits. That excites me more than it unnerves me. I park my car and head inside to Piper's kitchen.

"Bad day?" Piper asks.

I put my keys and bag on the counter and slip out of my coat. "No."

"Cameron?"

I go to Piper and let her hold me.

"Hey," she says. "Is this about that asshole, Jared Bennington?"

"I missed you," I tell her. I hear Piper sigh. "I'm sorry, Piper."

"Sorry? For missing me?"

"I don't want to be that needy girlfriend."

Piper grins. "Cam, I missed you, too. Do you want to skip Kelsey's party?"

Yes. I do. I'd prefer to stay at Piper's and watch a movie—alone. "We can't," I say. "It would hurt her feelings. I don't know what prompted this party. Whatever it is, it's important to her."

Piper kisses my forehead. God, she's so gentle. My grip on her tightens.

"Nervous about everyone learning we're together?" Piper asks.

I pull back and smile. "No."

"No?"

"No. But I don't intend to answer anyone's questions."

Piper smiles. "Do you trust me?"

"More than I've trusted anyone in my life." The expression on Piper's face tells me she didn't expect that reply. She looks—stunned. "It's true," I tell her. "I don't want to listen to Kelsey?—"

Piper stops my words with a kiss. She understands. Kelsey's friends tend to be open about their relationships. I prefer to keep what Piper and I share private. Kelsey views my desire for privacy as shame. I'm not ashamed of any part of my relationship with Piper. I'll be the first to admit I can be unsure—hesitant. I'm not ashamed.

"I know some of Kelsey's friends can be a bit over-the-top."

"Do you think so?" I ask.

"I had planned something for tonight."

"Don't change your plans for us because I'm acting weird."

Piper laughs. “I love you, Cam.”

“Good thing for me.”

“I hope so.”

“You know it is,” I say. “I love you, too.” I sigh. “Please don’t change any plans you’ve made.”

Piper lifts a brow.

I need her to lead me tonight, to feel the power she exudes. It calms me as much as it excites me. That’s something I hadn’t expected. I can tell she’s following my thoughts.

“I want you to be sure,” she says.

“I am.”

Piper grins. I’m not sure what’s about to happen, but her gaze takes on that sensual yet predatory haze that makes my skin tingle. Thoughts about Kelsey and her party drift away. Piper kisses me again—a deep, passionate, soul-searing kiss that makes my knees buckle. If she keeps this up, we won’t leave the house. “Piper. God.”

She hums. “I think we should get ready for our evening.”

Oh, I’m more than ready for our evening. She must read my mind because she

chuckles.

“Shower?” she asks.

“Together?” I ask.

She grabs my bag, pulls my hand, and leads me to the bedroom. Piper steps away from me and leans against the wall. “Take it all off, Cam.”

It’s taken me some time, but I’m comfortable undressing under Piper’s gaze. She never makes me feel awkward or self-conscious. She makes me feel desired.

“You are beautiful,” Piper says.

I look at her.

“I’ve set some things out for you in the bathroom.”

I frown.

Piper holds my gaze. “Cameron. You’ll understand when you walk into the bathroom. Relax. I can be part of this. I can help you with it, but I don’t think that’s something you’re comfortable with.”

My heart speeds and lifts into my throat. Piper has a unique way of pushing me past my apprehension, embarrassment, and fear. It might sound crazy to some people, but I can always feel her gentleness. It runs beneath the surface of her authority. It doesn’t matter what we explore, Piper is always focused on making me feel safe and cherished. That surprised me more than anything. I have an idea what awaits me in the next room.

Piper calls for my attention. “Cam.”

I suck in a nervous breath and nod.

Piper steps forward and kisses me. “Follow the directions I left you. I want you ready for the party—your hair and makeup, but don’t get dressed. Take your time, Cameron. As much time as you need. We’re not slipping into Kelsey’s party. We’re going to make an entrance—together. Come to me in the bedroom when you’re ready,” she says as she picks up my bag.

“No touching yourself in the shower, Cameron.”

Her words thrill me and tempt me to disobey. I haven’t deliberately challenged Piper’s authority in the bedroom—not yet. The more time we spend together, the more I’m tempted to resist to see what she’ll do. I confess, spanking always intrigued me. With Piper, I desire things that I used to consider shameful. I thought desiring something beyond tenderness meant something was wrong with me. She makes everything feel safe. That sounds crazy. Even to me. Wanting to be disciplined and controlled. Piper isn’t like Caleb. Kelsey talks a lot about his punishments. That word makes me cringe. I don’t want a partner who punishes me. Maybe it’s the way my mind works. I understand discipline in all its forms. It doesn’t scare me—it makes me feel safe. Punishment causes my stomach to revolt.

The moment I close the door, I see what Piper has left for me. She’s been gentle with me exploring double penetration. The last time she brought that into our play, I went from blissful to completely humiliated in less than a second. And humiliation isn’t one of my turn-ons. Piper smiled and reassured me—over and over. She’s always reminding me there’s a difference between feeling unsafe and being uncomfortable. I couldn’t look at her until she lifted my eyes back to hers. I cried and apologized. Piper kissed me and told me never to apologize for how my body responds to something. We talked later that night about preparing for times when she might want

to penetrate me anally. I cringed and asked if she had to be so clinical.

TWO WEEKS EARLIER

“Do we need to talk about this?” I ask. “It’s so—clinical.”

Piper laughs. “Maybe it’s an occupational hazard—sounding clinical.”

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I groan. “It’s—I feel?—”

“You feel embarrassed. I know,” Piper says. “Cam, you’ve been clear that you don’t want to prepare for our time together. You want spontaneity as much as possible.”

“Yes.”

“I know. But there are times when you may feel less uncomfortable with a little preparation—or, less self-conscious,” Piper says.

I look at my lap.

“Look at me.”

“Piper,” I begin. I take a deep breath. “I know I say I’ll try my best not to give you any shit—I never meant that literally.”

Piper stares at me for a minute and erupts in laughter.

“I’m serious!”

“I know,” Piper says. “But you can’t deflect this conversation with humor, Cameron. Seriously. If you can tell me how good something feels when we’re intimate, you should be able to talk to me about what doesn’t feel right.”

“It felt more than right until it got gross.”

“Well, bodies sometimes don’t obey our wishes. For the record, it didn’t bother me. But it does bother you. Enough to make you tense and even withdrawn.”

I look at her. “Piper, I didn’t mean to pull away.”

“Limits, Cam. Sometimes, we don’t know our limits until we reach them. We need to talk about what happens between us. That extends to our lives in and out of the bedroom.”

“It’s hard for me.”

“I know it is,” Piper says. “I think we should talk about a little preparation before we engage in any backdoor business.”

My jaw drops.

She winks.

“That’s not exactly sexy,” I say.

“Some people find it sexy.”

I cringe and she laughs.

“Clearly, not you,” Piper says. “I won’t be a part of any preparation, Cam. Okay? But I will let you know when I want you to be ready. And that doesn’t guarantee what will unfold between us—it’s just?”

“Prep. I get it.”

“Since you were valedictorian, I imagine you do.”

I finally laugh. Piper expertly walks a tightrope between authority and gentility. Her smile registers in every cell of my body.

“I love you, Cam,” Piper says. “Please believe me. I love being with you—just being with you. There isn’t anything you can ask for or ask me to stop that will change how much I love you.”

I settle into Piper’s arms and exhale. “Piper?”

“Hm?”

“I love you, too. More than I think you know.”

Piper’s grip on me tightens. “I know,” she whispers. “I know.”

PRESENT DAY

Preparation does feel a bit clinical—like my mom talking about going for her colonoscopy. I shudder. I could be in here for a while. Piper thought of that, too. She left me a book to read. Not a sexy one. It's a book about queer corporate America—something to refocus my mind. It works.

The moment I step into the shower and the heat embraces my skin, my tension eases. I reach for the bottle of vanilla and lavender body wash I brought to Piper's place. She loves this scent. She confessed she uses it when we're apart to feel closer to me. The thought ignites a fire in me, and I know I'm ready for whatever Piper has in mind for tonight. As the lavender and vanilla mix with the steam and the hot water cascades down my body, I feel bolder, more daring. Piper would never push me beyond my limits. But deep down, I know she has desires and fantasies she's hesitant to explore. As I dry myself off, I realize how much I want to give in to her, just as I know she willingly holds back her desires for me.

I take my time getting ready, knowing I want to drive Piper wild. I spend extra time on my makeup and hair, making sure every strand is perfectly in place. When I finally step into the bedroom, I find Piper sitting in the armchair, her eyes glued to a book. Desire burns in her gaze when she looks at me. She's dressed for the party, but not in a way I've ever seen. I've never seen her in heels, and she seldom wears anything formal. Her black dress hugs her curves and reveals just enough skin to make me ache with anticipation. I've heard Piper make comments in the past about her "extra pounds." I find everything about her sexy. Piper has curves—curves that shape her thoughts as much as they accentuate her body. She spends most of her days on her feet, and when she stands up, her black high heels elongate her toned calves.

My pulse races as she saunters towards me, her body oozing sensuality and confidence.

“You have no idea how tempted I am to stay home and touch you all night,” Piper says.

“There will be other parties.”

Piper grins. “I have plans for this evening, Cameron. Come here.” Piper steps forward. She cups my face in her hands and kisses me. “Did you behave in the shower?”

“I promise,” I tell her.

“Good. Because I want you needy and frustrated when we get home.”

Piper thumbs my nipples, and my breath catches. Something tells me she’ll get her wish.

“You like that,” Piper says.

“Yes.”

Piper’s head dips, and her mouth surrounds my left nipple while her fingers toy with my right. My head falls back in ecstasy. I think we should stay home.

“So good,” Piper says.

She holds my breasts together with her hands and licks my nipples. A jolt erupts in my center, blossoming into a steady throbbing need. I can feel the wetness pooling between my thighs and clamp them together, hoping for some relief. Piper taps my

thigh and directs them to part.

“Oh, no. Not yet. Not even close to yet, Cameron. We have alongnight ahead of us—one I’ve been waiting for.”

Piper trails a finger through my arousal and looks at me. I must look desperate because she chuckles as she circles my opening and teases me.

I whimper. “Piper.”

“Yes, Cameron?”

“Please.”

“No. You’ll come when I say it’s time and not before. You only think you want me now.”

“I do.”

“Is that so?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“No more talking,” Piper says. “Not until we get to Kelsey’s. You’ll speak when I ask you a question or grant you permission. When we arrive, we’ll resume our normal dynamic. Piper and Cameron—a new couple at their friend’s party. Until then, you speak only when directed or asked a question. Do you understand me?”

“Yes.”

“You’ll need your safe word tonight, Cameron.”

I gulp.

“Ask your question,” Piper says.

“I need it at the party?” I ask.

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“I hope you won’t need to use it at all. But if you need to leave the party before I’m ready, use your safe word. Otherwise, everything will be onmytimetable. If you use your safe word, we will come home.”

I nod.

Piper kisses me and circles my clit with her finger repeatedly, taking me higher but offering no chance of release. I grip her arms to steady myself.

“Get on your knees on the bed, Cameron.”

I move to the bed and see the small plug and bottle of lube Piper has laid out.

“Look forward,” she tells me.

I grip the comforter as she spreads my legs apart. Her tongue blazes a trail down my spine. She settles behind me, her warm breath caressing my center. She licks me in long, languid strokes. I press into her, and she stops. A smack lands on my ass—not as hard as she can deliver, but a reminder that she’s in control.

“Don’t move, Cameron. Stay in that position. I told you; you’re not coming soon.”

Her mouth resumes its exploration, and I grip the comforter tighter. The intense sensations coursing through me consume my mind. Every lick, every touch of Piper’s lips against my skin sends waves of pleasure rippling through me. The combination of her commanding presence and the deliberate denial of release has me teetering on the edge of desperation. Seeing the small plug and bottle of lube on the bed sends a

thrill down my spine. I fix my gaze forward as she positions herself behind me. I know what's coming next, and excitement intertwines with trepidation.

Piper hums against my center, and a slight tremor erupts from my core.

“You want it so much, don't you?” she asks.

She traces her tongue from my core all the way to my ass, teasing me with gentle suction. My body quivers in anticipation as she reaches for the plug. This one is larger than we've used before but still smaller than many I've seen. Her talented hands massage my ass, preparing me for what's coming. A wave of anticipation washes over me as the cold lube connects with my hot skin, sending shivers down my spine. I gasp in pleasure as her tongue teases and tantalizes my sensitive entrance again. She eases a finger inside with slow and deliberate movements, expertly stretching and preparing me. My body surrenders to her touch, every nerve ending buzzing with ecstasy. She increases the tempo, pumping in and out until I struggle to hold myself up. The plug glides effortlessly inside me, filling me. With skilled fingers, she delves into my core, teasing and stroking until I'm lost in a world of ecstasy.

“Oh, God.” I know I'm not supposed to speak, but I've never felt so full.

A smack lands on my ass, and I bite my lip to keep from screaming her name. I desperately want her to continue, to smack me again—to make me hers.

Piper withdraws her finger from my core and moves to look into my eyes. “Sit up, Cam.”

I look at her in disbelief.

“Sit up,” she says.

I comply.

“Now,” Piper says. “Go wash up. Don’t remove the plug.”

A rush of fear mixed with excitement travels up my spine.

“Get dressed.”

I stare at her.

“You’ll leave that where I put it until we get home. If it becomes too much—if you feel any pain—you whisper your safe word to me, and we’ll come straight home.”

I can’t stop staring. I’m not sure what I expected. It wasn’t this.

“Cameron,” Piper says. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes. Of course I trust you.”

“Get dressed. I know you’re apprehensive about this party—the people from my past life who will be there. I want you to be reminded every moment that you’re mine. And I’m yours, Cameron.”

Piper’s words reassure me. She reminds me that I’m hers—not as a possession, but as her lover, the only woman she desires. It fills me with a sense of love and devotion towards her. I’m determined to make it through the party until she’s ready to bring me home—even if it kills me, and it might.

When Piper and I first started dating, I couldn’t have predicted what would develop between us. I try not to have expectations in life. I prefer to approach life with a touch of optimism tempered by a dose of reality. Kelsey told me once that’s double-speak

for being a pessimist. Realism is not synonymous with pessimism. You might say I view life like I do the morning weather report. In the summer, when the weather person says it will be sunny and hot, I pack a bag with a towel, blanket, and bathing suit in the trunk of my car. But I always have an umbrella under my seat, just in case.

Attending Kelsey's parties is an exception to my unwritten rule. I view her get-togethers skeptically, with a touch of hopefulness. Experience has taught me Kelsey will push my buttons—and not the ones that enjoy being pressed. That's why Piper chose tonight for this adventure. I admit it. It's exciting to do something kinky while Kelsey remains oblivious. A smile creases my lips as I finish slipping into my dress. Little do you know, Kels.

Five

PIPER

I take several deep breaths when Cameron walks into the bathroom to get dressed. The moment she emerged from her shower, standing in the bedroom, her hair curled to frame her face, her makeup so flawless it was barely detectable—I wanted her. The willpower required to restrain myself is a testament to my commitment to bring her pleasure. As our trust deepens and we explore new limits, I sense she'll challenge my dominance. Her body trembled as my hand connected with her backside. The lustful haze in her eyes fueled my desire to claim her completely. But I know the frustration of holding back will heighten our pleasure when we return from Kelsey's party. I welcome a few minutes to regain my focus.

Cameron emerges from the bathroom in a deep red dress that fits her like a glove, and I can't help but feel grateful Kelsey made this a cocktail party rather than an informal beer fest. I don't care about the reason behind Kelsey and Caleb's party. My sole purpose is being with Cameron. She looks at me with a mixture of excitement and hesitation. This will be the first scene we play that has a public component, and the first time we reveal our relationship to the world. Kelsey knows we've been seeing each other. I haven't elaborated on my time with Cameron, and I'm sure Cameron has avoided the subject as much as possible with Kelsey. I know Kelsey hoped Cam and I would get together. I think she expected we would casually date, or perhaps, I would indulge some latent sexual fantasy for Cameron. Ultimately, I think Kelsey hopes being with me opens Cameron up to attending the club she frequents. There's no question Cameron has a kinky side. What's kinky to one person can seem vanilla to another. I've met a handful of people who think anything beyond heterosexual,

missionary position sex is kinky. God help them. But they do exist. Kelsey can't accept that not everyone wants to be as open about their sexuality or sexual proclivities as her. I don't believe Kelsey imagined Cameron and I would fall in love. And I am head over heels in love with Cameron Kelly.

"Piper?" Cameron calls to me. "Are you okay?"

"I slipped away for a minute, didn't I?"

Cameron nods. She steps up to me and lifts her hand to my cheek. "What is it? Second thoughts?"

"No second thoughts about anything, Cam. Quite the opposite."

She shakes her head slightly.

"I'm not living up to my role this evening," I say.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. Piper? Talk to me."

The concern and affection painting Cameron's irises leaves me breathless. There are many moments when I take the lead in our relationship—situations when Cam needs to relinquish her control and be free without trying to put things in order—things including her feelings. But our relationship is a partnership—give and take. I lift my hands to hold her face and kiss her.

"Piper?"

"I love you."

"I love you." Cameron searches my gaze.

“That’s what I was thinking when you walked into the room, Cam—how much I love you.”

A smile stretches Cameron’s lips. “It’s the red dress, isn’t it?”

I laugh. “It’s the whole package,” I tell her. “Now—how do you feel?”

“Are we talking about the party, how much I love you, or the fact that you’ve made it likely I will be on my feet for the entire party?”

I grin. She still has a lot to learn. I lean close and whisper in her ear. “Oh, Cam. No. You’ll be sitting foremost of the party.” I hear her slight gasp, step back, and wink at her. “Get your bag,” I say as I head for the door. “I’ll drive.”

Watching Cameron attempt to behave normally is as amusing as it I know it will become arousing for us both. She squirmed in the car so much I almost laughed. It’s a new experience for her. I have been in her seat—literally. Having an object inside you while you engage in public activities is a strange experience. I place my hand at the small of her back and guide her to Kelsey’s front door. Her posture stiffens. I slide my hand to her backside and lean close to whisper in her ear. “Breathe, Cam.” My hand caresses her ass. “Every time you move tonight, you’ll wonder what’s next, and whom might notice your excitement.” A tiny whimper escapes Cameron’s lips. I open the door and guide Cameron inside.

“Cam!” Kelsey calls out.

“Breathe,” I whisper again.

“Hi,” Cameron says.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Kelsey says. “Everyone’s in the kitchen.”

Cameron's hand slips into mine, and she squeezes firmly. I want Cameron to experience the thrill of maintaining composure amid discomfort and self-consciousness. It begs Cameron to keep control, while obeying my authority. It's a heady mixture of competing sensations and emotions. I've been on both ends—no pun intended—of the situation. Each time Cameron moves, she receives a reminder of my control and a silent command to maintain hers. Pushing past discomfort, whether emotional or physical, is part of discovery and self-acceptance. I'm confident Cameron wants this as much, if not more than me, but I never want to push her beyond vexation into distress.

"Let me put your jackets in the bedroom," Kelsey offers.

"No," I say, seeing an opportunity to check in with Cameron. "We know where it is. Besides, we were stuck on the freeway with all the construction. I don't know about Cam, but I could use a pit stop before we start with the merriment."

"Oh, yeah—of course," Kelsey says.

I pull Cameron into the bedroom, take her coat, and toss it with mine onto the growing pile on Kelsey and Caleb's bed. I glance out the door and close it. "Cam? Are you okay?"

“I’m sorry, Piper. I’m just so nervous.”

“If this is too much,” I begin.

“No,” she says. “No.”

“Cameron?”

“No. It’s not too much.”

“All right. Listen to me. I don’t want you drinking a lot tonight. I’ll make our drinks. Sip. One drink, Cameron. Sip slowly. Use it as a distraction when you feel overwhelmed—as a prop. I don’t want anything to cloud your judgment. Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

She sounds so small. I stroke her cheek and kiss her lips. “That’s my girl.”

She smiles at me. I seldom speak to her this way. It elicits a pleasant response from Cameron—as if the simple praise is the best gift she’s ever received. There’s an innocence about Cameron I find intoxicating. I’ve no desire to change that—only to help her embrace it. “Are you ready?” I ask.

Cameron nods.

I take Cameron’s hand and lead her back to the kitchen.

“Piper!”

Shit. Greg Hanson. I’ve known Greg for nearly twenty years. He’s a regular at Union, the club Kelsey and Caleb frequent—the club I once spent most of my weekends attending.

“Greg,” I say.

He looks at Cameron’s hand in mine. “Interesting,” he comments.

I’m neither amused nor do I intend to dignify his comment with a reply. My gaze is deliberately hard. He turns his attention to Cameron.

“Cam,” he says. “I didn’t know you two were,” he pauses to appraise me. “Together.”

I slip my hand out of Cameron’s and move it around her waist. I confess I’m tempted to take a swing at him. His arrogance astounds me. It’s a challenge—one I won’t accept. Greg Hanson would like nothing better than for me to tie him up in front of everyone, humiliate him, and use him as a toy. I’ve seen it. I’ve never granted him that pleasure—even when he all but begged. I don’t trust Greg. He’s nosy, and he has a big mouth.

“We didn’t publish an announcement,” I reply.

He grins.

“If you’ll excuse us,” I say. I lead Cameron into the kitchen.

“What was that about?” she asks.

“Ignore him,” I say. “That’s what I do.”

Kelsey seems more scattered than usual tonight, leaving me wondering about the purpose of this party. Cameron leans in to whisper to me. "Piper?"

"Hm?"

"What do you think this party is all about?" she asks.

"I have no idea." I guide her to a bar stool in Kaylee's makeshift kitchen pub. "Let me get us a drink." I watch Cameron as she settles onto the stool, trying not to fidget. I smile to myself as Cameron tries to maintain her composure while sitting on the barstool. Her cheeks are flushed, and she keeps shifting her weight, no doubt feeling the plug I had her insert before coming here. It might seem cruel that I'm making her sit in the one spot where the friction from the toy offers the most sensation. But for Cameron, masking her arousal is a turn-on, and anything that arouses her also drives me wild. It takes considerable effort sometimes to keep my desires in check, but it's always worth it. I finish mixing us each a very dirty martini and hand a glass to her. "Here you go." She takes it gratefully, and I let my fingers linger on hers.

I move back to stand behind her and trail my fingers over her neck to her shoulder, making her shiver. I lean into her ear and whisper. "It's making you crazy, isn't it?"

Cameron whimpers and I smirk, withdrawing my hand. "Patience, love. The night is still young." I move to Cameron's side, watching her over the rim of my glass. Her arousal is intoxicating, and I intend to draw out every delicious moment. She lifts her glass and takes a tentative sip.

"Cam!" Kelsey calls over.

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Cameron takes a shaky breath and musters a smile.

"I'm sorry, I've been preoccupied," Kelsey apologizes.

"Do you mean tonight or lately?" Cameron asks Kelsey.

"Fair," Kelsey says. She looks at me and then back at Cameron. "But you've been a bit preoccupied, too."

I let my hand fall onto Cameron's thigh and her hand finds mine.

Kelsey lifts a brow as she looks at us. "You two seem cozy."

Cameron shifts on the stool and blushes.

"I should thank you," I tell Kelsey.

"Should you?"

"Mm. For suggesting I get to know Cameron better," I say.

Kelsey grins. "And how is that going?"

It surprises me when Cameron answers.

"I'd say finding the love of your life qualifies as going well," she says.

I look at her, stunned, and suddenly incredibly emotional. Kelsey was about to give us a hard time or play thirteen-thousand questions. Cameron shut it down in an instant. "Don't look so surprised," she tells me.

For a moment, I forget all about this evening's scene, about making love, playfulness, Kelsey, parties, or anything in the universe. I lean close and kiss Cameron. "I love you, too, Cam."

Kelsey clears her throat. "And here I thought you two were hibernating in Piper's Den of Desire."

I smile at Cameron and turn back to Kelsey. "Den of Desire?" I ask.

"Sounded better than Playground of Pain," Kelsey replies.

I groan.

"Don't tell me you haven't let Cameron in on your secret," Kelsey says.

Cameron is my everything. I never hold back the truth from her, but there are parts of my past that I haven't shared yet. Perhaps it's time to open up about my time at Union. It's not something I'm ashamed of, in fact, it's shaped me into who I am today. My relationship with Cameron is the most important thing in my life. I'm not sure I realized that clearly until now. The way we surprise each other and the passion we share leaves me breathless. And if she ever tells me she needs or desires something different, I will do whatever I can to make that work. Cameron surprises me again when she addresses Kelsey.

"Let it go, Kels," Cameron says. "I don't care about Piper's nicknames or what she did with someone before me."

"I'm only teasing you," Kelsey says.

"No," Cameron replies. I can feel her anger simmering beneath her cool exterior.

"No, you aren't teasing me. You're baiting me. Is that why you wanted us here?" she asks. "Are you trying to prove something to your friends?"

"What are you talking about?" Kelsey asks.

"Cam," I whisper, trying to calm her fury. It doesn't work.

"You," Cameron says. "I confided to you about my feelings a long time ago. That doesn't mean I want to follow your path. I'm not you, Kelsey. And Piper isn't Caleb."

"Oh, no. Piper is far more experienced than Caleb."

That does it. "Enough," I say. If Kelsey wants to see my dominant side emerge, she just got her wish. I stand and face her. "That's enough, Kelsey." I feel Cameron's hand grab onto mine and turn to her. "Relax, Cam," I say. "Sip your drink. I'll be right back." I grab Kelsey's arm and pull her into the hallway.

"Oh, there she is," Kelsey nearly purrs when we're alone.

"Are you drunk?" I ask.

"Why so secretive, Mistress Trinity?"

"Kelsey."

"Oh, come on, Piper. Lighten up. You're in a room full of people who know you as Trinity. Would you rather one of them let it slip?"

I'm tempted to remind her we've been in this crowd many times before tonight—many times since I stopped attending Union. No one has ever said a word about my days at the club. Evidently, they have more respect for me than Kelsey. It occurs to me there are more people here tonight from the club than usual—people like Greg Hanson. "I don't care if Cameron knows what people called me in the past."

"Then why are we in my hallway?"

"Kelsey, I'm going to ask you a question. I suggest you answer honestly."

"Go ahead."

"Do you care about Cameron?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"Answer it," I demand, my voice eerily calm. I watch as Kelsey's demeanor changes and she gulps. Mistress Trinity wasn't my alter-ego. She's part of me just like every

layer of who I am. Clearly, Kelsey wants to see that side of me emerge. What she doesn't realize, is that IknowCameron will respond lovingly and appropriately if I take on that persona. Kelsey has unknowingly altered my plans for the evening.

I've told Cameron many things about my past, including a few things about my time at Union. She knows people referred to me as Mistress. I don't know why I haven't told her I was Mistress Trinity. It was my first partner, who taught me what it means to be a responsible dominant, that suggested the name. She said she admired my understanding of the delicate balance between power, pain, and pleasure. Just like how lust and love intertwine, constantly shifting from one to the other and back again, being a dominant is also a constant balancing act. Ihaven't spent time mourning that part of my life, but I admit, bringing Mistress Trinity to the surface is exhilarating.

"Answer the question, Kelsey."

"Of course I care about Cameron."

"Is that so?"

"Yes."

I raise a brow at her.

Kelsey's eyes lower.

"Since you are keen on discussing my past, how do you address me?"

"Yes, Mistress Trinity," Kelsey says.

"You have a funny way of showing you care. There is nothing I'm afraid to share with

Cameron," I tell her. "Inmytime. Not yours."

Caleb appears in the doorway with Cameron at his side. "What's going on?" he asks.

I hold up my hand and keep my gaze on Kelsey. "Would you like to tell Master Caleb what we're discussing?"

Kelsey looks at Caleb. "Mistress Trinity was reminding me who is the dominant."

Caleb looks at me and nods.

I look at Cameron. "I told you; I'll be right back. Go back to the party, Cameron, and wait for me."

Cameron looks at Kelsey, then offers me a nod.

I smile at her, take a deep breath, and shake my head when she disappears. "What the hell is with you two?" I ask.

"We were hoping you'd consider coming back to Union," Caleb says.

"And you think making Cameron and I uncomfortable is the way to do that? I don't have any interest in coming back to the club."

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"What about Cam?" Kelsey asks.

"I don't think Cameron wants that," I reply. "If you ask her, she'll tell you how she feels. And if you're her best friend, you'll respect her answer."

"We could use your presence," Caleb says.

"What the hell are you talking about?" I bite.

"Kelsey and I are buying the club—the building, too. That's what the party is about—to announce the rebranding of Union."

I sigh. "I see."

"We want to take it back, Piper," Caleb says. "To the way it was years ago. I want to take it back to a member-only club."

I massage my eyes. Caleb is only a few years younger than me. He remembers the days when Union was exclusive and discreet. I'm curious how this acquisition came to be, but I don't need to ask why they wanted me here.

"Piper," Caleb says.

I shake my head and look first at Kelsey. "You owe Cam an apology," I tell her. "A heartfelt one, Kelsey." I can see Caleb is ready to speak and hold up my hand. "Don't say a thing—either of you. Listen to me carefully because I won't repeat this. I'm in love with Cameron." My gaze falls on Kelsey. "You put my relationship with Cam in

motion. I don't know where you thought it would lead. Let me make this abundantly clear to you both. Cameron is the most important thing in my life. If you wanted my help—in any way—you should have asked me privately.”

Caleb nods. “Kelsey,” he says. “Go talk to Cam.”

“I didn't mean to upset anyone,” Kelsey says. “It's just you and Cam seemed in sync.”

My mood lightens slightly at Kelsey's observation. “That may be. You're Cam's best friend, Kelsey. If you've ever wondered why she doesn't always open up fully with you—this is the answer. She isn't you. You like the show. Don't say anything. You do. You both do.”

“You used to like to be on display, too,” Kelsey says.

“That was years ago,” I tell her.

“What if Cam wants that? To become part of Union?” Kelsey asks.

“Then we'll discuss it.” I hold up a finger. “Don't press that with Cam,” I advise her. “I'm not sure Cameron will ever want to set foot in the club, even if it's yours. You need to let Cam be who she is—not who you want her to be.”

Kelsey flinches. “I don't want her to be anyone else.”

“Maybe not. Constantly pressing her to enter your world will only drive her further away—and not only from Union.”

Kelsey nods and looks at her feet.

“Cam loves you, Kelsey,” I tell her. Her head snaps up, and she meets my gaze. “She loves you for who you are—the parts she understands and the pieces she doesn’t. She was nervous about tonight. Now, I can see why.”

“I want her to be happy,” Kelsey says.

“Mm. Her happiness might not mirror yours.”

“Piper?” Kelsey asks.

“Yes?”

“You really love her.”

“More than anything.”

Kelsey offers me a smile. “I guess I’d better find Cam.”

I breathe a sigh of relief when Kelsey walks away.

“Piper,” Caleb says. “I’m sorry if Kelsey was a little over the top. She’s excited about the club, and you know how it is. She wants to share it with her best friend.”

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“Yeah. I understand, but that’s Cam’s decision. You know as well as I do it’s a bad idea—a potentially damaging idea—to push someone who isn’t ready.”

Caleb looks towards the kitchen.

“Let them be for a few minutes,” I advise him.

“Do you think Cam will ever be open to it?” Caleb wonders aloud.

I shrug. “I don’t know.”

“And you?”

“I don’t know,” I reply.

“It looks good on you, Piper.”

My brow crinkles with confusion.

“Being happy,” he says.

I smile. “It feels even better.”

Six

CAMERON

I cautiously enter the kitchen, feeling a surge of both fear and excitement coursing through my body. The desire to ask Piper if we can leave this event and head home overwhelms me. The tension between Kelsey and Piper was palpable when I walked into the hallway. It made me feel like a voyeuristic novice—an interloper in their realm of dominance and submission. Kelsey’s behavior usually makes me anxious, causing me to distance myself from exploring her lifestyle. When Piper ordered Kelsey to acknowledge her as Mistress Trinity, I felt a sudden change within me. Watching Piper, feeling her presence fill the small space, captivated me. A swirling concoction of fear and curiosity swept through me as I considered what it would feel like to submit to Mistress Trinity—if Piper would ever reveal that part of herself to me.

I find an empty stool and carefully position myself on it. The moment the seat connects with my backside, a surge of desire courses through me. I lift my martini to my lips, the smooth surface of the glass against my mouth providing a moment of calm. Piper always prioritizes my pleasure, even if it means embracing a subtle element of pain. Thoughts of Piper consume me, and I’m overwhelmed by the urge to satisfy her desires.

“Cam?”

Kelsey’s voice calls for my attention. As I lift my gaze from my martini glass, I see her standing over me, her eyes filled with regret.

“Look,” Kelsey says. “I’m sorry. I didn’t intend to make you uncomfortable.”

Unsure of how to respond to Kelsey’s apology, I decide to be forthright. “But that isn’t entirely true,” I say.

“Cam. No. I admit I push sometimes. That’s because I want you to give yourself a chance.”

“You mean you want me to give your community a chance.” I sigh. “I love you, Kels. It isn’t me who you upset tonight.”

Kelsey’s expression is one of complete astonishment as she gazes at me.

“Do you think I don’t know who Piper is?”

“I—”

“I know who she is. I’m also aware of what she’s done and what she needs, Kelsey. You set us up—or maybe it would be more accurate to say you helped us connect. We haven’t been together long,” I admit. “But I love her, and I know she loves me. I’m sure there are many things we haven’t told each other—yet.”

“Cam.”

“Let me finish.”

I’m usually not one to address conflicts with someone in a public setting. And to be honest, I rarely assert myself with those closest to me. In my professional life, I have no trouble being direct, but with personal relationships, I shy away from confrontation. Piper has helped me learn how to share my feelings without guilt. I had many misconceptions about dominant and submissive dynamics. Piper has taught me giving in to desires and letting someone take control requires strength and trust. I trust Piper completely. More importantly, I’ve learned to trust myself. I’m getting better at pushing through discomfort to express my emotions. It’s a work in progress—just like me—but I like the progress I’ve made. I can see from the way Kelsey is gnawing on her lower lip that my directness surprises her.

“I’m not afraid to share anything with Piper,” I say. “And I’m confident she knows she can tell me anything—ask me for anything. Just as I can make any request of her.

That doesn't mean I have to agree to all her requests or her to mine. That seems to be something you don't understand. I know you love me. We've been best friends forever, but I'm not sure you respect me."

Kelsey stares at me for a few seconds. "That's not true," she says.

“No?”

“You’ve been part of the most important things in my life. I guess I wish you could be part of all of them.”

I raise my brow and smirk.

“Ew! Okay! Maybe not all of them.”

I chuckle and then sober. “It’s not me who felt uncomfortable earlier. I thought it would be,” I admit. “Piper’s uneasiness isn’t because she’s afraid to tell me things, Kelsey.”

“You really love her.”

“More than I thought I could love someone.”

Kelsey smiles.

“Tell me what this party is about.”

“Caleb and I are buying Union,” she says.

I blink a few times. “You’re purchasing a club?”

“I know—unexpected.”

Kelsey is one of the most intelligent people I know. I confess, I never envisioned her owning a business. She's an accountant, so she has many of the basic skills required to manage a business, but owning one? And I can't picture Caleb running a company. I continue to wonder how their dynamic works. Caleb has always struck me as impulsive, which seems at odds with taking control. The last thing I want to do is rain on Kelsey's parade, but I admit, bright flashing warning lights are going off in my head.

"It's something we both want, Cam."

"And that's why you were pushing Piper's buttons?"

"That wasn't my intention. Piper is—people respect her," Kelsey explains. "Look, I already caused issues tonight. Piper's right. It isn't my place to tell you about her past."

"Do you mean to tell me people sought Piper as a mistress?"

Kelsey's jaw drops.

I shrug. "Do you think that surprises me?" I laugh. "Seriously, Kelsey? Believe me, I get it."

"We could use your help—both of you."

"All you need to do is ask," I say.

I feel Piper's hand on my shoulder and reach with my free hand to hold it. "I may never be part of that scene—clubs and public displays. I can still help you with the business in the background." I see Kelsey ready to speak and shoot her a warning glance. "We're your friends, Kelsey. Ask. I can read between the lines. Having Piper at

the club would help you establish a positive reputation.”

“Yes, it would,” Kelsey says.

I squeeze Piper’s hand and feel the warmth of her touch as her thumb gently circles mine. “Then you need to ask her privately, Kelsey—or ask us. We’ll discuss it. That’s what couples do.”

I feel the reassuring squeeze of Piper’s hand, grounding me in the present moment. I don’t need to look at her to know she’s having an emotional reaction to my words. She will never ask me to put myself in a situation that causes me lasting pain or trauma—physically or emotionally. I’m not sure she realizes I don’t expect her to sacrifice everything she wants for me.

“Understood,” Kelsey says. “I am sorry, Cam.”

“I know.” I let go of Piper’s hand and take Kelsey’s. “Next time, ask.”

Kelsey nods, looks at Piper, and smiles. “I should make some rounds.”

“Yes. You should,” Piper tells her. She moves to my side and sits on the stool beside me. “Sorry about that,” she says.

“Sorry?” I lean close and kiss Piper’s cheek. “Nothing to be sorry about.” I lean close. “Mistress Trinity,” I whisper.

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Piper's laughter fills the room, her head thrown back in delight. This unexpected twist made our night even more perfect than I imagined. As she kisses me, her hand finds its way to my thigh, sending a pleasant shiver down my spine.

"Did you enjoy watching that?" she whispers seductively into my ear.

In an instant, our dynamic changes again, and I become keenly aware of Piper's touch—the warmth of her hand on my leg, the growing desire stirring within me. With each lazy circle her fingers make on the fabric of my dress, I can feel her claiming me as hers. My heart races under her penetrating gaze as she studies me with a deepening smile. She takes the martini glass from my hand and sets it aside, focusing solely on me. "I think we've had enough alcohol for tonight," she declares before turning away, leaving me yearning for more of her touch. My thoughts go dark, obscured by the sensation of her fingertips tracing patterns on my thigh.

"Soon," Piper whispers.

I'm grateful when Piper stands and tells Kelsey we're leaving. The conversation in the kitchen became animated after Caleb announced he and Kelsey were buying Union. According to Greg Hanson, Piper, or rather, Mistress Trinity, is a legend. No one shared details of Piper's days at the club. It surprised me a little to learn the previous owners wanted Piper to become a partner in the business. One thing is clear: many people still want to experience Mistress Trinity's expertise. I'm curious about the extent to which Piper reveals or withholds parts of Mistress Trinity from me.

Piper surprises me when she opens the backdoor of her car and gestures for me to climb inside. "Get in, Cameron."

I take a nervous breath and comply with her directions. “No talking for the rest of the night unless I ask you a question.”

The vast expanse of leather between us makes me feel isolated as my mind unravels. The aroma of vanilla and a distinct fragrance that belongs only to her fills the air and makes it nearly impossible for me to focus on anything else. Piper’s alluring presence fills the car with an undeniable tension, electrifying the air between us. Her gaze feels heavy as it bores into me through the rearview mirror. The drive home from the backseat is a rough and jarring experience that constantly reminds her of her possession.

I’m boiling over with anticipation when we finally pull into her driveway. Piper steps out of the car and guides me towards the front door with an allure that leaves me breathless. She doesn’t look back or wait for me like she usually does. She has asserted her dominance in this moment of silence, reminding me of my place tonight. My heartbeat echoes loudly in my ears as I follow her into the house. She navigates through familiar routes, her strides sure and determined. I feel myself shrinking in her presence, insignificant and powerless against her unwavering control.

Piper turns and holds my gaze at a distance. “Do you need the bathroom?” she asks.

I shake my head.

“That’s not an answer.”

“No, Piper.”

“Very well. Get undressed.” She gestures to a glass by the sink. “Drink a glass of water. Then go to the bed, lie on your back, and wait for me.”

Before I can seek permission to ask a question, she’s gone. I shimmy out of my dress

and look down at the puddle of red fabric on the floor.

“Leave it all there,” Piper calls back, as if I’ve spoken my question aloud.

Her voice is a chilling wind that sweeps through the open space. It impales me with its authority. I follow her direction, stripping the rest of my clothes until I’m bare. I go to the sink and fill the glass as she instructed. The water is cold against my parched lips, a contrast to the fever burning inside of me. I drink slowly, steadying my breathing between sips.

The bedroom welcomes me with an intimate ambiance as candlelight bathes the room in a soft, golden hue, reflecting off the plush ivory comforter. I can’t help but notice the restraints tightly fastened around the iron headboard. I chose the purple cuffs from a catalog Piper showed me a few weeks ago. I wondered when she would introduce them. I run my fingers along the leather, and I am struck by its softness. Reluctantly, I lie on my back. Anticipation builds within me, coiling like a spring in my belly. In this waiting game, a strange sense of tranquility emerges, a reminder that control is an illusion. With a simple word, Piper will surrender her control without hesitation. I used to associate dominance with strength and submission with weakness, leading me to believe dominance was the only path to freedom. I understand now that submission also holds the power of liberation.

Piper’s steps echo in the distance like a clock ticking in an empty room. I can hear her movements as she arranges whatever she needs for tonight. Lying here without Piper’s voice or touch to guide me feels like an eternity in purgatory. Will she punish me for some transgression or reward me for my obedience? Her footsteps grow closer until her silhouette is painted against the dim light. “Beautiful,” she says.

I close my eyes and let her compliment ease the tension in my body. Her right hand swiftly grabs my left and secures it in the cuff. She smiles down at me, her gaze predatory. A fingertip trails through my arousal, and my hips rise in a silent plea.

“Oh, no,” Piper says. She pulls away. “Touch yourself.”

My eyes pop open to meet hers, brimming with a mix of confusion and excitement. She lifts a brow to show there is no room for questioning. I watch as her lips stretch into a wicked grin.

“Go ahead,” she coaxes, stepping back and crossing her arms over her chest as if she is about to judge the contestants in a talent show. “Don’t let yourself come.”

With a shaky breath, I obey her command. A soft gasp escapes my lips as pleasure rolls through me. The intensity in Piper’s eyes nearly sends me over the edge.

“That’s it,” she says. "So needy."

The air between us crackles with electricity, and my heart thumps an out of time rhythm in my chest. I feel her gaze burning a hole right through my skin, igniting my courage.

“Piper,” I breathe her name out, hopelessly trapped between yearning for her closeness and the unspoken rules of our little game. If she views it as a transgression, she says nothing of it.

Silence stretches between us, punctuated only by the sound of heavy breathing that hovers in the air. She tilts her head, and her fingers brush gently over my breasts. I strain to reach for her and feel the tug of the cuff around my wrist, a reminder of my position.

“Do you like this?” she asks. It’s not a question, but an affirmation. Tonight is as much about power and control as it is about pleasure. Piper is aware of my deep longing to satisfy her, and she intends to take what she wants. Her lips blaze a trail to my aching nipples, sucking until pleasure consumes my senses. Piper pulls away

abruptly, her grip on my hand tightening as she swiftly slaps the cuff around my other wrist. “I’m not even close to being finished with you.”

I whimper, and Piper’s lips meet mine tenderly. Her touch is an intoxicating blend of subtlety and strength. It reminds me of sipping a fine whiskey, the burn before the rich flavors of cherry and vanilla takes over. Our relationship is a paradox, a constant dance between fiery desire and cool detachment that intensifies my longing for her. Piper can calm my insecurities with tender touches or encourage me to pursue my deepest desires with a seductive gaze. Her presence perfectly combines passion and strength, making me yearn to be under her spell.

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“Easy,” she coos.

Piper places a soft kiss on my cheek before rising from the bed. I close my eyes and remind myself to breathe, wondering what she’s doing. I don’t need to wait long for the answer. Piper lifts my head and places a mask over my eyes.

“Breathe, Cameron.”

I nod dumbly.

Piper’s warm breath caresses my neck. Her mouth descends on mine hungrily before drifting away to nip at my shoulder. A small cry escapes the back of my throat.

“Too much?” she asks.

“No.”

She chuckles, the sound cascading over me, wrapping me in a cloak of anticipation. Her steps echo in the room as she moves further away from the bed. Losing her presence feels like a sudden winter chill. My mind drifts, but I’m snapped back to reality by the sensation of Piper’s warm tongue teasing my core. My hips jerk involuntarily, and Piper presses her weight against me. Her hair softly brushes against my thigh, while her tongue skillfully teases and taunts my clit, coaxing it out of hiding. She hums against me, making me writhe beneath her.

“Patience,” she says. She resumes her exploration, gently pushing and tugging the plug inside me, building up an intense sensation that threatens to make me lose

control.

“Tsk. Tsk,” she murmurs. “I didn’t say you could come.”

The sensation of her tongue on my clit coincides with the sensation of the plug sliding out of me. The feeling of loss is suffocating, disappointment spreading through me like a thick fog.

I feel the mattress depress beneath me and spring back as she stands.

“What did you think, Cameron?” Piper asks. “Did you have a secret wish for Mistress Trinity to take you home, where she would instruct you to kneel, deliver a flogging, and then fuck you until you couldn’t help but cry out?”

Heat surges through my core at her words, twisting my stomach into knots. Is Piper about to become Mistress Trinity? What will she demand of me—what do I want her to demand of me? Waves of anxiety and curiosity surge through my nerves, causing my muscles to tense.

“Isn’t that what you thought when you saw me address Kelsey? You wonder if you’ve met Mistress Trinity—if you want to meet her.”

The unmistakable sweet scent of vanilla and arousal tickles my nose as she kisses me. As her dress delicately brushes against my skin, a shiver runs down my spine, and the roughness of the sequins adds a delightful friction that causes me to squirm in anticipation under her touch. She takes her time exploring my mouth with her tongue, holding my hands against the bed, tightening the surrounding cuffs in her grip. I’m helpless to do anything but submit. My mind falls into a peaceful stillness, surrendering to overwhelming emotions and sensations. Without warning, she pulls away again. Each time she leaves me alone, the lingering silence becomes more unbearable than the last. I can’t form a single thought amid the whirlwind of

emotions colliding within me—a profound yearning for Piper grips my heart and squeezes. It’s beyond desire or excitement. It’s love—deep, abiding, desperate love. The need to be filled by her—my heart, body, and soul—hers for the taking.

Tender kisses flutter across my forehead and down my cheeks. A brief touch of Piper’s lips to mine calms me. It’s a promise without words. She discovers my body slowly with her hands and mouth—a sharp bite followed by a tender caress. Hard and soft, pain and pleasure—all of it leading me spiraling toward an ecstasy only Piper can provide. She settles between my legs again, teasing me to the edge of release and stopping. Again. And again. Edging me towards desperation.

“Ask,” she says.

“Please, Piper.”

“That’s not a question, Cameron.”

“Please, I need you inside me.”

“Still not a question.”

I pant.

Piper moves on the bed, and I feel the cold sensation of lube drip down my center.

“So desperate,” Piper says. “Tell me, Cameron. How did it feel being reminded of me all night? Feeling me inside you—wondering if anyone could tell you were so close to having an orgasm? You were. More than once.”

The sound of Piper’s voice alone has the power to bring me close to orgasm. The layers of restraint, denial, and authority push me closer to the edge. She taps on my

hip with a fingertip and directs me to lift. An unfamiliar texture surrounds me, and I realize she's about to fasten a harness around me. I hear her breathing grow shallow as she plays with me, spreading my wetness and the lube over my center and backward. Her finger slips inside me, pumping in and out a few times before slipping back, teasing my ass, and slipping carefully inside, stretching me gently.

“Breathe,” she whispers. I obey as she slowly fills me up with something new. The sensation is electric and unfamiliar; a small plug slips into my ass, quickly followed by the smooth shaft of a dildo brushing over my clit before sliding inside me. Piper's lips find mine in a feverish kiss, distracting me from any possible discomfort. As she secures the harness, the toys settle even deeper inside of me, and I let out a low groan of pleasure.

Her hands guide the harness with precision, and I feel the weight of her palm as she secures a dildo to the front of it. I can feel every inch of the toys inside of me. The bed shifts beneath us as she straddles me, her wetness sliding between our bodies as she moans in anticipation. Unable to see her, I can only imagine her fingers exploring her arousal. She pauses her movements and reaches to remove the blindfold from my eyes. As it falls away, I see her gazing down at me with pure lust. She lowers herself onto the thick dong, our eyes locked in an intense stare as her lips part in pleasure.

Her movements are entrancing—graceful and deliberate, rather than desperate. Each time she lowers herself, the dildos inside me slip deeper, stealing the air from my lungs.

I can't help but lose myself in the pleasure. My fingers grip the chains attached to the cuffs, holding on as if I might slip away into some unknown abyss. My eyes are riveted to her, and the intensity of her gaze coils in my belly. My heart races as Piper's hips drive down harder and faster, the sound of flesh meeting flesh filling the room. It's the most beautiful sight I've ever witnessed—her feminine power is like a drug, and I'm happily addicted to her.

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“Is this what you wanted?” Piper asks, her voice only barely audible above the pounding of my heart. “To be filled by me completely?”

“Yes.”

Piper’s fingers pinch my nipples, sending a jolt of electricity through my entire body. She moves her hand down my side and reaches for something. I feel a vibration erupt between us. My climax is building rapidly, and I know it won’t be long before I lose control completely. As I watch Piper’s breasts sway above me—all I want is to bring her pleasure.

“Tell me, Cameron. Tell me what you’re feeling,” Piper says. Her words are not a request; they’re a demand.

I whimper, my voice cracking as I gather the courage to speak. “I want to watch you come.” I don’t think Piper expected that reply. Her eyes glisten with something I can’t quite discern. I continue. “Take it, Piper. I want to watch you.” God, I do. I long to witness Piper’s unraveling, the way her voice can effortlessly undo me with just a few words.

Piper’s hands fall to my sides as she continues to grind against me, and I suddenly wish I could hold her. She looks into my eyes, smiles, and reaches to release the cuffs around my wrists. I pull her close as our passion builds. I feel her shudder as we fall over the edge together.

“Piper,” I whisper.

“Cam.” Piper’s body continues trembling above me as mine rises to meet hers.
“Cam,” she says again.

It’s me who coos in her ear, comforting her. “I love you, Piper.”

The wetness of her tears on my shoulder makes me sigh. I caress her back. “Piper. What just happened?”

“I love you, Cam. I love you so much it hurts.”

I roll slowly to my side until Piper is beneath me, carefully withdraw the toy from inside her, unfasten the harness, and gently remove it. My body hums with aftershocks as the toys slide out of me, and I collapse next to Piper in blissful exhaustion.

“I’m sorry,” she says.

“For loving me?” I ask.

“No. For losing control.”

“Piper.” I kiss her tenderly. “I might be curious about Mistress Trinity. I’m in love with you. I love that you can take control and give it back without hesitation.”

“But I shouldn’t lose control, Cameron.”

“Our life isn’t a scene to play,” I tell her. “As much as I love that part of us—I never want you to pretend to feel something you don’t or not tell me what you need. You would never accept that from me.”

“Are you sure you don’t have a dominant side?” she teases me.

I smile.

“Oh. Felt a little niggly to turn the tables tonight, did we?” Piper asks.

“Only a little one.”

“When was that?”

I study the curve of her cheek and trace it with a fingertip. “Watching you.”

“Watching me ride you?”

“I wanted to take you so much at that moment, Piper. More than I ever wanted you to take me.”

Piper smiles.

“You don’t seem surprised.”

“I’m not.”

Our lips meet in an understanding kiss, and I settle into Piper’s arms. “I love you so much, Piper.” I yawn and tighten my hold on her.

“I love you, too, Cam. Sleep.”

I let myself drift away in Piper’s embrace, feeling safe, loved, and grateful.

Seven

PIPER

As I watch Cameron sleeping in my arms, I ponder how she’s changed my life—how she’s changed me. Society tends to judge and form opinions based on the most superficial aspects of a person: where they were raised, their education, career, appearance, style of dress, and manner of speech. Those things tell you where a person has been and what they do. To honestly know someone, you must dive deep, layer by layer, and risk drowning in them. For me, that’s what being with Cameron is like—an exhilarating descent into the uncharted depths of our beings, where we navigate through darkness to find the light within each other. It’s a never-ending journey, constantly revealing parts of ourselves we’ve yet to discover. While floating with someone can provide a sense of security, the electrifying sensation of going below the surface is unparalleled. I feel her shift against me, and the need to feel her closer overwhelms me. My hands caress her back as she shifts to look into my eyes.

Her gaze is filled with a mixture of vulnerability and desire. I see the reflection of my longing mirrored back at me. We’ve embarked on this adventure together, willingly diving into the depths of our souls, and now we stand at the precipice of something greater. The connection between us crackles with intensity, like an electric current waiting to surge.

As I lean closer, our lips connect in a powerful kiss that stirs my heart and reveals a profound truth. I never want to be without Cameron in my life. I've waited a lifetime for her—for us. Our bodies meld together as if we were always meant to fit perfectly. The world fades away, and it's just her and I—two souls entwined in a dance of love and self-discovery.

With each brush of our lips and every sweep of our hands along each other's skin, we shed expectations and judgments like the discarded clothing on the floor. Our bodies become one, moving in a delicate and intricate dance fueled by passion and trust. In this moment of raw vulnerability, fears and inhibitions dissipate into the abyss as we surrender to the love that consumes us. As my lips reverently explore every inch of her skin, I realize with bittersweet clarity this is the first time I've truly made love. Time loses its hold on me as I place her beneath me. I smile at her and sweep the hair from her eyes.

“You're my everything,” I tell her.

“Piper.”

I've given myself to someone and allowed them to fulfill the desire that ignites deep within my body. Cameron's mere presence evokes a longing so intense that it can only find solace in the softness of her embrace—a union where we unite as equals—give and take. She releases a muted sigh, and the room instantly goes silent, except for the rhythmic pounding of our hearts, mirroring the intensity of our emotions. Her skin feels like silk beneath my fingertips, and the warmth of her breath upon my neck sends shivers down my spine. Each touch, each loving kiss, leaves an imprint on the fabric of my soul.

The words “I love you” take on a new depth of meaning in this intimate embrace, and I know I would do anything to protect and cherish her. The raindrops outside provide a soothing soundtrack as I explore every inch of her skin with my tender caresses.

Our eyes meet, full of longing and desire. Making love with Cameron is an emotional and sensual experience that I never want to end.

Cameron's hand slips between us, stroking me gently, and my heart clenches with understanding.

"Cam," I whisper.

"I love you, Piper."

We move together effortlessly, instinctively anticipating each other's needs, rising like a wave toward the shore. Her eyes meet mine, offering solace that she will rescue me from the depths of my fears. She's like the ocean—deep and mysterious, teeming with life and color.

"Stay with me, Piper."

As the wave swells, we hold onto each other, feeling its powerful force, throwing us into the unknown depths and leaving us at its mercy. Gasping for air, we struggle until the wave finally retreats, and we peacefully drift back to the shore.

Cameron cups my face in the palms of her hands.

"I'll never let you go, Cam."

She smiles and kisses me. "Is that right?"

The gravity of my words isn't lost on me. "Cam, I've never said that to someone. I've never?—"

Cameron silences me with another kiss. "I know, Piper. Everything with us is new for

me, too.”

“Thank you.”

“Why are you thanking me?” Cameron asks.

“For loving me.”

“Oh, Piper. You never need to thank me for loving you. My life is so much better with you in it—every part.”

I lie back and pull Cameron into my arms. I close my eyes and revel in her warmth pressed against me.

“Piper?”

“Hm?”

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“Mistress Trinity is legendary?” Cameron asks.

I chuckle. “Hardly.”

Cameron props herself up to look at me. “It sounds like other people feel that way.”

Her voice isn’t teasing but rather curious. I sigh.

“I’m sorry, Piper. If you don’t want to tell me about it, you don’t have to.”

I roll on my side to face her. “Cam, there isn’t anything I won’t tell you.”

“But you haven’t told me everything—not about that part of your life. Why did you stop going to Union?”

I haven’t talked about this in a long time. In fact, I’m not sure I’ve ever discussed this in depth with anyone. “It isn’t like I sat down, made a list of pros and cons, and decided to stop going. Things changed. I changed.”

“How so?”

“Teagan loved the club.”

“Your ex?”

I nod. “I let her in, Cameron—closer to me than anyone—until you. I guess that’s why I haven’t talked about this. And maybe that sounds contradictory. I trust you

more than I have anyone in my life. You need to believe me.”

“I do. I felt something tonight with you—like you were drifting away for a moment, and then suddenly, you were pulling me closer than you ever have.”

Accurate. “Because tonight I realized I’m completely in love with you. I know we’ve said the words. It’s like gravity pulled me down. I don’t know how else to explain it.”

“I understand.”

“You do?”

Cameron smiles. “Making love with you—the way we just did—I needed to feel that with you. Tonight pushed my limits,” she says.

“Too far?”

“No,” Cameron explains. “I don’t mean anything that happened between us. Hearing them talk about you that way.”

I’m puzzled. It must show because Cameron giggles and then sighs.

“Cam?”

“I don’t think I could share you, Piper. Maybe that makes me weak. You ask me all the time about limits—hard limits. Seeing someone touch you or watching you touch them—I’m not sure I could handle that.”

“That won’t happen, Cameron.”

“But it’s part of who you are.”

“No. It was part of the life I led. And I won’t lie to you, I enjoyed it for a long time.”

“Do you miss it?” Cameron asks.

“No.”

She lifts her brow in challenge.

“I have fantasies, too,” I admit. “I’ve explored most of them. I don’t have any regrets—not about being kinky. None.”

“What happened to change things? Was it Teagan?”

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“She was a big part of the reason I stopped going to clubs. Union wasn’t always the club it is now. Years ago, my friends Lisa and Marv held a monthly night for kinky people, usually in a warehouse they rented. In the beginning, there weren’t enough people attending to sustain a permanent business. As more people discovered what we were doing, the viability of a club became clear. They purchased the building and opened Union. For a while, it was great.”

“What changed?”

“The clientele shifted. Union started as a member only club. There were tiers you could purchase—annual, Saturday only, and a once-a-month pass.”

“I thought there still were?”

“There are, but most people pay a cover charge to enter. Lisa had some health problems, and Marv thought it was time to move on from the club. They sold it to friends.”

“Blake and Rachel.”

I nod. “Blake and Rachel made some changes—let people in without memberships. Until they bought Union, you had to come as the guest of a member. I understand why they did it. Membership had started to wane.”

“Why?”

“People change.”

“You mean they lose interest?” Cameron asks.

“I’m sure some do. I don’t think people stop being kinky, but their lives change, Cam. People have families and new obligations. They face career considerations, financial obstacles, and relationship realities. Instead of frequenting a club every weekend, it becomes a monthly visit, or they make it a special occasion. Plus, the internet makes it possible to find like-minded people without leaving your living room or the kitchen table. It didn’t feel the same.”

“And that’s why you left.”

“It’s one reason. Discretion matters for many people. Do you think knowing the person who is caring for your child’s broken bones after someone beat them also enjoys flogging their partner is something that instills confidence?”

“How would anyone find out?”

I shrug. “Who knows? It’s always a risk at a club. But that risk is mitigated substantially when the owners are careful and thoughtful about who is admitted. It’s not like I walked around in a mask, Cam—or a leather hood.” I wink.

Cameron giggles. “But that’s not the only reason you left,” she says.

I’ve only scratched the surface with Cameron about my relationship with Teagan. It’s time I tell her everything.

“We don’t need to talk about this,” Cameron says.

I smile and kiss her. “Teagan’s limits existed beyond the edge of mine. It didn’t start that way. When we were first together, we fit like a glove. She enjoyed showing her dominant side when I sought it. That changed with time. She wanted to submit to

me—fully.”

“You mean outside of the bedroom.”

“Yes. That isn’t what drove us apart. Although, I confess, it became exhausting. I was happy—no—I was willing to assume that role because it fulfilled her.”

“Piper?”

“It was never enough, Cam. Her limits edged closer and closer to the cliff where mine ended. I wasn’t willing to jump off.” I sigh. “She liked pain. And I enjoyed delivering it—to a point. It started as a healthy dynamic. The farther we went, the more extreme her desires became. She wasn’t looking for discipline. She wanted to be punished—and not to find emotional or physical release. I don’t know. I reached a point where I had to choose. Jump off the cliff into the abyss she sought or step back from the ledge. I stepped back.”

“I’m sorry, Piper.”

“Don’t be. I like where it led me.”

She kisses me. “Me, too. But I know it hurt you.”

“Losing her hurt. I loved her, Cam. Watching her take that path for all the wrong reasons nearly killed me. She found a willing partner, and they moved to Georgia. Me? I lost my stomach for it—all of it for a while. I discovered where my limits lie—the soft and hard ones. I wish it hadn’t been so painful, but it’s a lesson I needed.”

Cameron smiles. “So, you gained legendary status before Teagan?”

I laugh. “Greg is an idiot.”

“I won’t argue that point,” Cameron says. “But I got the feeling he’s not the only person who sees you that way.”

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Legendary?“I told you. Back when Union started, it was small. Lisa was a close friend. I helped them at the club—with the club.”

“Do you mean with decorating or running the bar?” She tries to hide her smirk.

“Believe it or not, I helped with that, too.”

“I believe it.”

“I was still a kid when I met Lisa. By the time they bought the building, I’d been part of the community for ten years.” I sigh. “I was young, Cam. Still young. And I wasn’t attached to anyone—not emotionally.”

“What about your first partner?”

“Brianna was terrific. We were at a similar place in life. We both played with other people at the club, but we always decided when, how, and who together.”

“Piper?”

“Hm?”

“Why won’t you tell me you miss it?” Cameron asks.

“I’m happy with us.”

“I know. That’s not what I asked.”

“Cam? Is that something you want?”

Cameron sighs. “I don’t know if I could handle watching you touch someone, Piper. And fantasies aside, I’m not sure I could let someone else touch me—not even under your direction.”

“But?”

“Watching you tonight piqued my curiosity.”

I nod.

“You knew,” Cameron says.

“What you just said is something many people forget matters.”

“What did I say?”

“Fantasies aside. There are fantasies that beg to be fulfilled, and then there are those that are better left to our imagination. Determining the difference isn’t always easy. It means knowing yourself, and if it’s in a relationship, trusting your partner. Brianna and I shared that kind of relationship. We pushed boundaries respectfully.”

“Why did you break up?”

“I don’t know.” I laugh. “I told you; we were young. I think we outgrew each other—emotionally. She wanted to get her PhD and teach at a university. Brianna will be a life-long student—of everything.”

“And you?”

“I wasn’t ready to slow down,” I reply. “Much less settled down. I was still trying to figure out what I wanted to be when I grew up—never mind who I wanted to become.”

“I get it.”

“Do you?” I ask.

“Sure. Why does that surprise you?”

“You’re so together, Cam. Not many could achieve what you have by the age of thirty-three.”

Cameron sits up and sighs.

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“Cam? I meant that as a compliment.”

“I know. I knew what I wanted to do when I graduated from college, and I did it.”

“Is this about Jared’s offer?”

“In a way.”

“What way?” I ask.

Cameron flops back onto the bed and covers her face.

“Cam?”

“Aw, shit, Piper. We just had an amazing night. The last thing I want is to fuck it up.”

“Impossible.”

She turns and looks at me doubtfully.

“Nothing you tell me will spoil tonight. I promise.”

“It’s not enough for me,” Cam says. “The business. It’s become—mechanical. It’s fine. I want more than fine in my life.”

“Why do I think this is about more than the business?”

“It’s about everything.”

My heart just lodged in my chest.

“Oh, no. Piper, I’m not about to tell you I’m unhappy with us.”

I nod.

“No. See? I already made our night go from amazing to stressful.”

“You didn’t. I’m not sure what this is about.”

Cameron shifts to look at me. “This is still new—you and me.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And I know we need time to build our relationship.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But.”

I raise a brow. “Cam?”

“I’d like to think we’re headed for something—permanent.”

The initial surge of anxiety subsides, replaced by understanding, and I can’t help but plant a kiss on her lips. “I told you; I don’t intend to let you go. I don’t want to envision my life without you, Cam. Why would that ruin our night?”

“There are a lot of things we haven’t talked about.”

“Like?”

“Like, do you want a family someday?”

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“I’d be open to it with the right person,” I tell her. “Do you?”

“I never thought about it much until recently. I mean, I thought about it, but never about?—”

“Pursuing it?”

“Yes. Being with you seems to have me thinking about many things I never seriously considered.”

“Is that right?”

“It feels—being with you feels like being home.”

I smile.

“Even when I feel unsure, I know I’m safe with you. And I don’t mean what we did tonight. That’s part of it. You never try to mold me into what you want me to be. It’s both freeing and grounding. It’s like that meditation exercise Kelsey taught me in college where you imagine roots growing out of your feet.”

“I think I saw that once in the emergency room.”

Cameron laughs. “I’m serious!”

I laugh and wink at her. “I understand.”

“You do?”

“Completely. That’s why I broke down earlier. I couldn’t get close enough to you. That’s never happened to me before—not with anyone.”

“Piper, I want you to make me a promise.”

“If I can.”

“Tell me if you have the burning desire to go to Union again.”

I sigh.

“I mean it,” Cameron says.

“I know you mean it.”

“Are you afraid for me to see how people respond to you?”

All my doubts about Cameron’s understanding of me vanish with that single question. “Yes.”

“I thought so.” She caresses my cheek. “Piper, I love you—every part of you. Don’t say anything. Hear me out. I meant what I said earlier. Watching you with someone else would hurt. I want to give everything to you, but I can only give myself to you. Beyond that? You need to tell me.”

My heart clenches, and memories of the first time Cameron and I made love flood my mind. I feel the warmth of my tears as they slip over my cheek. We all have demons. One of mine just surfaced.

“What is it you’re so afraid to tell me?” Cameron asks.

“I’m not afraid to tell you anything. The only thing that makes me interested in attending Union is you.”

“Me?”

The wonder in her voice makes me chuckle. “You. Not to show you off—to let you inside that part of who I am. All the way inside. But I don’t need that. I promise you that’s true.”

She tips her head.

“I have fantasies, too. But I know my limits. You told Kelsey I’m the love of your life.”

“You are.”

“And you’re my everything, Cam.”

“If I wanted to go to the club—to do the things you’ve done before—would you be open to it?”

Out of all the questions she could ask, this is the one I dread the most.

“Piper?”

“It would excite me—the idea.”

She nods.

“The idea—the fantasy. I don’t know, Cam. That’s also the truth. I’m not sure how I would feel if we took that path. And I don’t want to risk what it could do to the trust we’ve built. I love you too much to push that boundary. So, no. I’m not sure I could grant that request.”

Cameron’s eyes sparkle as she leans in to kiss me. “Thank you.”

“For?”

“For letting me know how I feel isn’t crazy.”

“Huh?”

“It excites me, too, Piper. But I feel it in my soul. It might be exciting for a moment. I

would regret it afterward. I know I would. But feel free to talk about it,” Cam says.

I burst into laughter. I never know how Cameron will reveal her fantasies and what turns her on to me. “I’ll add it to the list,” I tell her.

“You do that.”

I chuckle and kiss her forehead as her grip on me tightens. I’ll definitely add it to the list.

“Piper?”

“Yes?”

“I think we should hold the next party.”

“Oh?”

“Mm-hm. Here. I want to see Kelsey grovel.”

I laugh. “Put it on the calendar.” I don’t know what is next in our lives. I’m confident we’ll face it together, and I can’t wait to watch it all unfold.