

# LOVE Has NO Boundaries



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# THE BRAT WHISPERER

## J.A. Rock

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*An M/M Romance series*

## THE BRAT WHISPERER

By J.A. Rock

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

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The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

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# THE BRAT WHISPERER

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## Photo Description

Image of a young man looking off into the distance with a tear running down his face.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*He's alone—so alone. How did his life come to this? And who's going to help him find his way?*

*Please let this be contemporary with no paranormal elements and an HEA. Other than that, anything goes.*

*Sincerely,*

*Becca*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** BDSM, domestic discipline, hurt/comfort, MMMM, spanking, nerdy trading card games, self-abuse

**Word count:** 19,071

# THE BRAT WHISPERER

By J.A. Rock

The driveway was full, so I parked on the lawn. I recognized Jake and George's Jeep, Terrence's scuffed junker, Dave's motorcycle, and somebody's spotless blue Mini, gleaming in the late afternoon sun. A dog barked in the backyard.

Terrence was walking out to meet me before I'd gotten all the way out of the car. "Mike," he called.

"Okay if I'm on your grass?" I snagged my duffel from the passenger seat, straightened up and shut the door.

"Not a problem. How are you?" He stuck out his hand, then seemed to think better of it and hugged me.

"Doing fine."

He stepped back. "The trip wasn't too bad?"

"Nope." I nodded at the Mini. "Who belongs to that?"

Terrence gave a tight smile. "Corwin."

"Ah."

"I really appreciate you coming here, Mike. And I hope you don't think I've asked you here just because of the situation."

I wondered if he meant my situation or his. "Of course not."

"You've got a standing invitation anyway, just..."

"Just you needed a brat whisperer."

Terrence sighed. "Yeah."

Terrence and I had been friends back when we'd worked together in Toledo, but our communication had grown sporadic over the last few years. Ter had moved to a large house on the outskirts of Brookside, a dubious suburban paradise, and I'd stayed in Frogtown. I'd visited him once last

year—met Dave, George, and Jake and had helped them all plant a vegetable garden—but mostly we stuck to the occasional e-mail.

Ter and I didn't have much in common beyond our involvement in the BDSM scene, and in the Toledo days, that had been enough. We'd played together occasionally, but mostly we were confidants, sharing details of our sessions when we did meet up with subs, shopping for equipment together, and exchanging advice.

Ter was an interesting Dom—quiet and undemanding almost to where his patience could be mistaken for uncertainty. He was a good match for sugar kink subs—boys who liked to play games but weren't looking for a serious D/s relationship. He'd had one long-term partner since I'd known him, a sub his own age who was almost as easygoing as he was. They'd broken up two years ago.

Soon after Ter moved, he'd met Jake and his sub, George, and Dave, a switch. They'd all moved into a large farmhouse on Bolton Road, far enough from town to afford themselves some privacy, but not way out in the boondocks. I was fuzzy on the dynamics, but I was okay with fuzzy. The atmosphere of the house when I'd visited before had been relaxed and fun. Everyone got along well; no one seemed to feel jealous or excluded.

Until Ter had adopted Corwin.

Ter had spilled the story to me in a series of e-mails last month. He'd met a brat—young, beautiful, and out of control. They'd been play partners, then lovers, and finally Ter had invited Corwin to stay at the house for a while, since Corwin had apparently been surfing friends' couches for months. Ter didn't know much about Corwin's background but had reason to believe Corwin was a runaway.

As soon as Corwin had moved in, he and Ter started butting heads. Corwin left the house a mess, copped an attitude with Dave and Jake, and treated George like shit. The only time they were all happy was when they played together. Corwin was glad to submit to Terrence, Jake, and Dave in the bedroom. Anywhere else, he was a terror.

When Ter had finally sat him down to talk, he'd gotten a surprising confession: Corwin wanted Ter to punish him. Not sexually, but as a corrective measure.

Kudos to Corwin, I couldn't help thinking, for knowing what he needed. But poor Ter had no experience with that kind of arrangement. Ter didn't have experience with brats period.

So he'd called me. Mike Jarred: brat whisperer.

I'd always gravitated toward brats. A former brat myself, I guess I felt I understood them—the combination of fear, anger, insecurity, and enthusiasm that drove them to misbehave. Their deep need for contact, love, approval, and attention. Some Doms couldn't stand brats. I loved them, and more importantly, I loved them enough not to put up with their bullshit.

That was, from what I could make out, Terrence's problem. He adored Corwin, and he couldn't seem to reconcile adoring Corwin with punishing him when he needed it. However, the impression I got wasn't that Ter considered Corwin potential boyfriend material—more that he was fascinated by him, worried about him, and that he wanted to help Corwin in whatever time they had together.

Inside, Terrence showed me to the downstairs guest room, just off the kitchen. I cleaned up then went to join him at the table.

“Drink?” he asked.

“Water, please.” I looked around. The house seemed empty. “Where is Corwin?”

“At a friend's. He'll be back for dinner. I hope.”

I heard the barking again and looked out the window. A giant, shaggy black beast was chained to a doghouse.

“That's Monster.” Ter passed me a glass. “He's Jake's. I want to get rid of him. Slobbery booger. Corwin loves him.”

I snorted. “I'm trying to picture you cleaning up dog shit.”



“I don’t.”

That was Terrence through and through—he didn’t clean up anyone’s shit. Which was why it surprised me he had taken Corwin on.

Ter sipped his coffee. “Can’t believe the firm fired you. Bastards.”

I’d known it would come up, but it took effort to keep my gut from clenching. Yes, I’d been fired. It shouldn’t still make me wince to say it, or think it. “It was time for me to get out of there anyway.”

“You look great, though. Your arms are, like... Are you working out?”

“Pretty much nonstop, now that I’ve got the time.”

“Well, like I said, you can stay here as long as you want.”

I nodded, more than ready to change the subject. “Tell me about Corwin.”

“I tried what you said in your e-mail. Talked to him a couple days ago about not letting the dishes sit. I told him I expected him to wash his dishes after each meal and said I’d spank him if he didn’t.”

“How’d he react?”

“Last night, he finished supper, walked off and left his dishes. I told him to come back and clean up. He wouldn’t, so I told him he was getting a spanking.”

“And?”

“He flipped out. He said it wasn’t fair, I couldn’t do that to him, he wasn’t going to take it, I was a bastard... then he left the house and didn’t come back until almost midnight.”

“At which point you...”

Terrence colored slightly. “We, uh, went to bed.”

“You didn’t spank him?”

“No.”

“Next time put him over your lap before he can get all that nonsense out.”

Ter took another sip of coffee. "I'm not going to physically hold someone down and hurt them when they're telling me they don't want it."

"He *does* want it. Or rather, he wants you to do it even though he doesn't want it."

Terrence shook his head. "I don't get it. What the hell's he want with a spanking that's not gonna get him off?"

"He wants a safe way to screw up."

"If I'm gonna punish him, he's got to cooperate. I'm not you. I don't have the scary voice. Or the brawny arms. I can't *make* him do anything."

"Come on, you've punished subs before."

"As a *game*." Terrence put his face in his hands and dragged his fingers down his cheeks. "I'm so not cut out for this."

"If you really have no interest in a discipline relationship, you should tell Corwin that. But I do believe you can be trained."

"Ughhh. I hoped you were coming here to train *him*."

I grinned. "That's your job."

Terrence sighed. "I told him he can stay here as long as he needs, and I meant it. I think he trusts me and wants to, you know, impress me or something. But it just isn't clicking for us. I mean, the sex is good. Really good. He plays well with all of us. But the rest of the time, good Lord. I want him to start behaving like an adult before someone in this house kills him."

"It's not right that he's putting a strain on your relationship with Jake, George, and Dave."

"He doesn't mean to," Ter said quickly. "Sometimes he's really good."

"In bed, when he's getting the attention he wants from all of you. Right?"

Ter fiddled with his mug and nodded.

"Does he ever get jealous? Say, if you Tops are focusing more on George?"

“We’re really careful about making sure both subs get equal attention. But yeah, once in a while he gets pissy. Especially if George is being, uh, rewarded.”

“And does he—”

I didn’t get a chance to finish my question, because a car door slammed outside.

“That’ll be him.” Terrence glanced at me. “Don’t scare him, okay? You probably think he sounds like a total bastard, but he is nervous about meeting you.”

I grinned. “Good.”

The screen door slammed, and a young man bounded into the kitchen. He wore loose jeans and a fitted white T-shirt. His dark hair was thick and curled at his ears. He was a couple of inches shorter than I was, and considerably shorter than Terrence. He moved quickly and gracefully, making for the sink and rinsing his hands without looking at Ter or me.

“Hey there,” Terrence said.

Corwin didn’t reply.

“Have fun at Sam’s?”

Corwin shrugged and shook his hands to dry them.

“Cor, this is my friend Mike.”

Corwin glanced at me. Blue eyes, full lips, straight nose with freckles across the bridge. A soft, almost quizzical expression. “Hey,” he said.

“Hello,” I replied.

“So you’re here to fix me?” The question had a forced casualness, and he moved closer to Ter as he asked it.

Terrence nudged him. “I told you, Mike’s gonna talk to us and help us figure some stuff out.”

“I’m interested in what you told Ter the other day,” I said. “About the kind of relationship you want.”

Corwin ignored me, wiping his hands on his jeans and turning to Terrence. “I’m going out.”

“Jake’s gonna grill.”

“I’m going out,” Corwin repeated. He left the kitchen and I heard him pounding up the stairs.

Ter shook his head. “Sorry. He’s usually more social.”

“Not a problem. He really is beautiful.”

“Right?” Terrence lowered his voice. “Fucking *gorgeous*. But I don’t know.”

“What don’t you know?”

“I want to help him. I really do. But I don’t know if it’s worth it to me to invest myself in this kind of relationship when I’ve got no idea if we’re even—I mean, I don’t think we’re compatible. This is about sex. Sex, and him needing a place to crash. He wants something, and I just happen to be here, so he’s asking me.”

“You really think that’s all it is?”

“Like I said, I think he trusts me. And that’s good. And I do like him. I’m just not sure I want to be his boyfriend. Or even his long-term Dom.”

“Does he know that?”

Ter nodded. “We’ve talked about it.”

“And he still wants you to discipline him?”

“Yep.”

I leaned back. “You don’t have to be his 24/7 Dom. When he asks you for a spanking, you give him one.”

“He doesn’t ask.”

“Of course he does. Why do you think he leaves dishes in the sink?”

“See, I don’t know these things.”

“You know more than you think you do.”

Ter rolled his eyes. “We’ll see.” He drained the last of his coffee and set the mug firmly on the table. “He spends enough time washing that car. He ought to be able to do the damn dishes.”

“Tell him that,” I said. “Just like that, mug slam and all. I’d listen to you.”

He laughed ruefully. “I think the problem is I want someone who *wants* to listen to me.”

I didn’t say anything. It could be a problem.

But maybe it didn’t have to be.

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Dinner was pleasant. Jake and Dave grilled, and George kept up a steady chatter. Corwin returned as we were cleaning up. We heard him in the backyard playing with Monster, the giant schnauzer.

“He loves that dog,” Jake said.

“I think he just loves ignoring us,” George muttered.

Corwin came in a moment later. He acted as though I wasn’t there but was perfectly friendly toward the others. I asked him a question about his car, and he pointedly ignored me.

“Excuse me, Corwin,” I said. The others looked at me, so Corwin had no choice but to follow suit. “I asked what kind of gas mileage you get on the Mini.”

“Oh, uh. It’s fine.” He gave me a brief smile that I guessed was supposed to dampen my annoyance at having been disregarded for the last twenty minutes. “I don’t know too much about cars. My parents bought that one.” A dark look crossed his face, and he stared at me for a moment as though daring me to say something.

After dinner, Corwin, Terrence, and I went to the study. Corwin sat next to Terrence on the couch, and I sat in a leather chair, feeling not unlike a therapist

as I tried to read Corwin's body language. He seemed to take comfort in Terrence's presence, but he wasn't clingy. Actually a good deal of his energy was focused on me. He sat slightly forward, watching me as though I was about to perform a magic trick and he was determined to see how I did it.

"All right," I said.

"All right," Ter echoed. He had his hand over Corwin's and was rubbing his thumb over Corwin's knuckles.

"I didn't think we needed to call a summit meeting to talk about this," Corwin said to Ter. "It's not really that complicated."

"Shh. Listen to what Mike's got to say."

"Corwin." I kept my voice low and clear, and waited for him to look at me. "Can you tell me a little bit about the type of relationship you'd like to have with Terrence?"

"Uh," Corwin said. "You know, like... discipline relationships?"

"I am familiar with them, yes."

Corwin looked at his feet. "I can be a real asshole. I want Terrence to punish me when I am."

"Punish you how?"

Corwin flushed. "What do you think? Spank me. Hard," he added. "I don't want to play around."

"What do you think that would do for you?"

"Make me think before I act like a jerk. There'd be consequences, and maybe that'd make it easier to control myself. Like—I can control myself, but sometimes it's hard to want to." He glanced up. "Because it's like, so what if I don't? The world's not gonna end." He shrugged. "Whatever. I'm rambling."

"That makes sense." I kept my gaze on him a moment longer before I turned to Terrence. "How does that sound to you, Ter?"

"I guess I just wonder about, you know, consent." He nudged Corwin. "When I told you I was going to punish you last night, you told me no."

“I want you to make me. It’s not a fucking game.” Corwin’s voice shook a little and I realized suddenly how much this meant to him, and how difficult it was to ask for.

“I have trouble with that,” Terrence said.

Corwin looked at me again. “Maybe you could do it.”

“Pardon?” I said.

“Just to show Ter. I mean, you know a lot about this discipline thing, right?”

“You’re asking me to spank you?”

Corwin’s blush went from his forehead to his neck, but he nodded. “Maybe while you’re here I could answer to you. And we could see if spanking really works on me. And Ter would see it’s okay to make me take it.”

I thought it over. I’d given other Tops advice on how to administer spankings, but rarely did I spank a brat who wasn’t mine.

“You’d better ask Terrence, don’t you think?”

He turned to Terrence. “Sorry,” he said quietly. “Of course, it’s up to you.” He kissed Ter’s shoulder.

Ter pecked him back. “It’s up to *you*. If it would help you, and if Mike’s willing, I don’t mind.”

The words seemed to sting Corwin.

*He wants it to be up to Ter. He wants Ter to mind.* But there was something else there—resignation. Corwin understood that Terrence likely wasn’t a permanent fixture in his life.

“You won’t get jealous?” Corwin asked.

Ter stroked the nape of Corwin’s neck and shook his head slowly. “It’s like when you play with Jake or Dave, isn’t it?”

I flinched on Corwin's behalf. Ter thought he was telling Corwin what he wanted to hear, but I had a feeling Corwin wanted to hear the opposite. Or maybe Ter knew exactly what he was doing. Maybe he was just being honest.

"But not play," Corwin clarified. "And anyway, Jake and Dave don't do anything to me unless you say so. I'm mostly yours."

Ter's hand stilled, and he tilted his head. "Would it be... I mean, would you be naked?"

Corwin glanced at me, looking, I thought, rather hopeful.

"I would require Corwin to take his pants and underwear down," I said.

Corwin shifted. I wondered if he was hard. Wondered why I was wondering.

Ter squeezed his hand.

"While I usually prefer to use my hand for a spanking," I continued, "I might use a paddle, hairbrush, ruler, belt, or switch as I see fit," I said. "Understood?" I looked right at Corwin.

He nodded.

"A belt?" Ter raised his eyebrows.

"I'm fine with that," Corwin said quickly.

"Here are my rules." I waited until Corwin was looking at me again. "I will never administer a punishment without your full cooperation."

"But—" Corwin started.

"I'm not finished. I know you said you like to fight. That's fine. You can fight as much as you like, though that behavior will most certainly add to your punishment. But I'm not going to manhandle you over my lap. When you are ready to cooperate, you will take your own pants down. You will assume the proper position. And you will explain to me exactly what you did to earn your punishment. Understood?"

"What if I don't?"



“Then you can hang out in the nearest corner until you’ve settled down.”

Corwin’s eye narrowed a little at that. I made a mental note of it. “What should I call you? Do I have to call you sir?”

“Mike is fine.”

He hesitated. “*Can* I call you sir during a punishment?”

“If you’d like.”

“Can Terrence watch?”

Huh. Interesting. “If that’s what he wants.”

“What about participating?” Terrence asked.

Corwin and I both looked at him.

“Maybe there’s something I could do to help you out, Mike.”

Corwin laughed suddenly. “You could hand him implements. Like a surgeon’s assistant.” He held out his hand to demonstrate. “Nurse—paddle.”

Ter grinned. “Something like that.”

I nodded. “That’d be fine.”

Corwin turned his face into Terrence’s shoulder and sighed. “I’m tired,” he murmured.

Terrence rubbed his back. “Why don’t you head upstairs? I’ll join you in a little while. If Mike doesn’t have any more questions.”

“I have one.”

Corwin’s gaze locked with mine. He didn’t look tired. He looked sharp, eager, ready. I still couldn’t quite process that I *actually had permission to spank him*. God, he’d be a pleasure to spank. All nerves and defiance on the outside, but so fucking desperate to have that stripped away. Even if I wasn’t spanking him to get us both off, my body inevitably reacted to the idea of him over my lap. There was something about being offered trust, control, the opportunity to guide a brat past that initial anxiety and resistance that was such a turn-on.

He'd dug his fingertips into his knees while he was talking, clearly tense. I gave him a brief smile.

"Have you been spanked before? Besides in play?"

"Um, not really. Maybe once or twice when I was, like, really little. I didn't realize it was hot until a few years ago." He paused. "Is that okay? That I think it's hot?"

"Of course. Just be warned that a spanking I give you will not be an enjoyable experience."

Corwin nodded. "Yeah. That sounds... I mean, that's what I want. For it not to be enjoyable. But I also... I like that?"

"Then you're perfect," I said, and instantly felt my face heat. "For a relationship like this, I mean. Arrangement, I should say."

He grinned. I almost couldn't stand it. No one had a right to look that stunning when they smiled. No one. "Thanks."

"You're dismissed," I said.

He got up, leaned down and kissed Ter, then gave me a nod and left the room.

"He's a good kid," Terrence said, staring after him.

"I can see that."

"Really?"

"Yep. A brat, but not a fool."

Terrence leaned back. "You feel okay about this? About spanking him?"

"I was gonna ask if you felt okay about me doing it."

"Are you kidding? I'm relieved as hell."

I laughed. "Well, you know I'd never pass up a chance to spank a brat."

"I don't even think I could take myself seriously if I tried to punish someone for real. He ought to have a Top like you who likes doing it."

I wasn't sure what that meant, but I didn't like how quickly some core part of me leaped in agreement.

“You'll watch and learn,” I said.

And hoped it was true.

\*\*\*\*

I woke around two a.m. and got up to get a drink. I found Corwin at the kitchen table, a bunch of cards spread out before him, chin resting on his arms. He looked up when I entered.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hi.” He smiled shyly.

I couldn't explain it, but I was glad to see him. I told myself it was because I was ostensibly here to help him and Ter get on track with the discipline stuff, so it made sense I'd want to spend time with Corwin and get to know him.

“You're up late. Are you—?” I paused. My eyes widened as I stared at the cards on the table. “You play *The Foresworn*?” I asked.

The cards were unmistakably TF cards. *The Foresworn* was a trading card game—absolutely beyond nerdy, but God, I loved it. I'd gotten pretty addicted in my early twenties but had been clean for several years now.

“Fuck yeah, I play,” he said.

“Can I see your cards?”

“These are just my new ones.” Corwin passed a small stack to me as I took a seat across from him. “I've got tons more.”

I went through the stack. “These are awesome. You play with the guys?” I nodded upstairs.

“Hell no. Dave and Ter had never even heard of TF. And George thinks it's stupid. I play with a group in town. That's where I was earlier.”

“Oh. Cool.”

“I don’t like them much, though. I mean, they’re okay people, we just don’t have anything in common outside of the game. And they’re kind of weird and boring.”

“I had a group I played with years ago,” I said. “I guess I worried I was too into it. So I stopped. Tried to convince myself I’d outgrown it.”

Corwin passed me a few more cards. “My parents used to hate hearing me talk about it. I was such a nerd when I was younger.”

“Oh, no way. No way. You have a Troubadour Demon?”

He slapped the table lightly. “Got it last year. Cost me a fortune.”

“You ever play in tournaments?”

“Nah. I’m not that good. And I’d need to build a better defensive deck. Right now I’m mostly offense.”

“Attack first, ask questions later?”

He half-smiled. “It’s how I’ve always been.”

My mind wandered back to what he’d said about his parents. “Where do your parents live?” I asked.

“In Crystal City.”

“That’s a hike.”

“Got out of there as soon as I turned eighteen. I’ve never been back.”

I looked up. “You miss them?”

“Nope. They fucking hate me. They didn’t even care that I left.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Nothing to be sorry about. I hate them too.”

“Hmm. I don’t know them,” I said carefully. “But they are your parents, and I’ll bet there’s a good chance they don’t really hate you. That they’re just... behaving badly.”

He reached across the table and pulled the cards toward him. “You’re right. You don’t know them.” I was silent, and he continued, “I’d live anywhere before I’d go back to them. I’d live in a fucking hole in the ground.”

“Well,” I said, not sure what else to say.

“Well,” he repeated after a moment. “What’s that mean?”

“It means I’m sorry your parents are dicks.”

He looked bewildered and maybe a little angry. Then he smiled that huge smile. “Me too.” He laughed. “I didn’t think you’d say it like that. You seem really proper or something.”

“Ter used to call me sanctimonious.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“It means I think there’s a right way and a wrong way to do most things. And I tend to make my opinions known.”

“And you like spanking guys who do things the wrong way?”

I snorted. “Maybe I’m kind of a prick sometimes. But I used to be a major brat, you know.”

“Naw. You?”

“Yep. And I found a couple of guys to take me to task for that.”

“And now you’re the after picture?”

“The what?”

“Like before and after? Forget it. It was stupid.” He snagged a couple more cards I’d just put down. “I do things the wrong way all the time. I’m so fucking... I don’t know.”

He was having trouble getting one card off the table’s surface. I placed my hand gently on his. He froze.

“You’ll figure it out,” I said quietly.

He stared at my hand on his and swallowed. Nodded. I wished he'd look at me again. I wanted to see his eyes. "They send me money, at least. My parents. So I guess I shouldn't complain."

I removed my hand, and he pulled his arm slowly back to his side, leaving the card.

"Do you ever see them?" I asked.

He shook his head. "They never tried..." He stopped and shook his head again. "Um. To find me. Which is fine. Because I wouldn't have... And okay, you're a stranger, and this is weird." He forced a laugh. "I'm just saying if you think I'm a freeloader, you're pretty much right."

"If you are, I am too, now. Maybe Ter told you I lost my job."

"That sucks."

"Yeah. Weird to have all these unfilled days."

He picked up the deck and shuffled absently. "Sometimes I think I just play TF because it passes the time. I can play for hours. It's like, yeah, I'm probably wasting my life, but at least it's something I can focus on. I'm not totally ADD, you know."

"Of course not."

He finally met my gaze. "You don't hate me, do you, Mike? I don't want you punishing me if you don't like me."

"I like you fine. I wouldn't discipline you if I thought my personal feelings would interfere."

"Have you seen the shed out back?" he asked.

"No," I replied. He wasn't making much of a case for the "not totally ADD" thing.

"Come see it."

"It's after two."

"It's nice outside at night. Come on," he pleaded.

I relented and followed Corwin out the backdoor, across the yard, and into the shed. Monster barked at us.

“We’re going to wake the whole house,” I said.

“We’re not going to. Monster is. Monster, be quiet!”

Monster barked once more, then fell silent.

“He just has to get the last word in,” Corwin said.

“No wonder you two get along so well.”

Corwin gave a delighted yelp, and I held back the urge to shush him. “Mike. I’m not such a brat, I swear. When I try to behave.”

“How often is that?”

He grinned. “Not often.”

The shed was nothing special. Unexpectedly tidy, with garden tools in one corner, a riding mower in another, and a little L-shaped stall that had an electric lantern on the floor.

“I come out here sometimes when I can’t sleep,” Corwin said. “I listen to music or read or whatever. I bring Monster in sometimes.”

“Do you have much trouble sleeping?”

He shrugged. “My brain gets loud. I can’t stop thinking about stuff.”

“What kind of stuff?”

He didn’t answer for a while. “I’m not sure how long I can stay here.”

“Why not?”

He moved a pebble around with the toe of his shoe. “They’re nice to let me stay. But I don’t fit in. Ter’s a nice guy, and he treats me really good, but we’re not right for each other. He knows it. I know it.”

“Well. He likes you a lot.”

Corwin smiled at me as though I was cute but not terribly smart. “Ter feels sorry for me. And I kinda like when people do that.”

For someone supposedly inattentive and unfocused, he had a pretty good handle on his own feelings.

“I do like Ter,” he continued. “And I’m not going to leave unless he wants me to. Maybe he’ll be okay with me being here if he can spank me to vent his frustration.”

“That’s a terrible reason to get involved in domestic discipline,” I said sharply. “Punishment isn’t about venting frustration or—”

“Would you relax? I’m joking.” He laughed. “Is this your sanctimonious side?”

“Maybe,” I said, feeling foolish.

He stared at me a minute. Then reached up and briefly touched my face. Mock scowled. “So *serious*,” he said, and laughed again, letting his arm drop to his side. “I’ve wanted a relationship like this since before I knew they existed. Ter’s the only person I’ve found I would trust to do it right. Well, and you.”

“Why trust me?”

Corwin shrugged again. “I guess because Ter does.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. Corwin pulled the bulb chain and turned off the light. In the darkness, I could hear his breathing and the crickets outside.

We went back into the house. He stumbled going up the step, and I braced him with a hand on his shoulder. His skin felt warm under his T-shirt, his shoulder hard with muscle and a little bony. He paused just a little too long. I knew it was time to take my hand away, but I didn’t.

I went to bed and tried to fall asleep. “*How often do you try to behave?*” I asked an imaginary Corwin.

“*Not often*,” he replied, grinning wickedly.

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I figured Corwin would try to earn a spanking right off the bat to see what I was all about, but he was an angel the next day—friendly to everyone in the house, careful to clean up after himself. I helped Ter, Jacob, and George harvest some cucumbers in the garden that evening, then we all went out to dinner at a Japanese steakhouse in town. Corwin stayed out all evening, and I couldn't help feeling bizarrely betrayed. What had I expected? Just because we'd bonded a little last night didn't mean he was going to spend all of his time hanging around me.

Or that I wanted him to.

The next day, I went to the store. I was still trying to get used to being unemployed. It sucked extra hard to be fired from a job I'd hated. Yeah, it would have blown to lose a job I'd liked, but it was insulting to be fired from something I should have quit long ago. It felt even worse to be unemployed and staying under someone else's roof. I wanted to make sure I bought my own food, at least.

My parents had offered to loan me money. I had no intention of taking them up on the offer if I could help it, but I was grateful to them all the same. I thought about Corwin leaving home at eighteen, trying to imagine how hard that must have been. Sure, he was an adult, but who the hell had jack shit figured out at eighteen? I hoped Corwin's parents had the sense to know that sending their son an occasional check wouldn't make up for whatever they'd done to make him think he wasn't welcome in their lives.

When I came home, Corwin and George were at it in the living room.

"You're a fucking lunatic," George shouted. "If I were Terrence I'd beat your ass 'til shit comes out your ears."

Then, from Corwin, a stream of curses even I was impressed by and a detailed description of where exactly George could go and what he could do there.

I set the groceries on the counter and went to the living room.

George saw me first, and he stopped shouting.

Corwin looked over his shoulder. When he saw me, he looked like he had to fight a smile.

“What’s going on in here?” I crossed my arms and leaned against the doorframe.

George smoothed his shirt. “Well, um, Corwin picked up one of my books by the front cover. I told him not to do that because it hurts the spine. So he threw the book, and now the spine’s broken.” George held up the book as evidence. “Then he acted like he was gonna punch me.”

I looked at Corwin and raised an eyebrow.

“That’s what happened,” Corwin said, not sounding remorseful in the least. “Except he also called me a cunt.”

“The book’s expensive,” George told me pleadingly.

Corwin shrugged. “No reason to call me a cunt. I’d have gotten you a new copy, if you hadn’t said that.”

“You’ll *still* get me a new—”

“Stop it, both of you,” I interrupted. “George, could you please give Corwin and me a few minutes?”

“Okay,” George muttered. As he passed me on the way to the door, I put a hand on his shoulder. He jumped about a foot and then froze. I gave him a reassuring squeeze, and he let out the breath he was holding.

“Jake’ll be home soon,” I said gently.

He nodded. I patted him and sent him on his way.

When I turned back to Corwin, he was watching me, a strange expression on his face.

I closed the gap between us in a couple of strides. Corwin took a step back, hunching, then quickly straightened and stared me in the eye, all defiance.

“What were you thinking?” I asked.

“Who cares?”

“I care. Answer the question.”

“I was thinking George’s got a shovel up his ass about his books.”

“I’d like you to take the garden shears, go outside, and cut a switch off the big elm in the back,” I said. “It should be about a foot long and thin, but not flimsy. You want something with some flexibility to it, but that won’t break when it lands.” I spoke quietly, matter-of-factly. “Strip the leaves off and bring it to me in the study. Understood?”

Corwin’s gaze hadn’t left mine. His jaw trembled.

He turned and walked out the front door. I heard his car start.

I sighed and headed upstairs.

He’d be back sometime.

I found George and talked to him for a bit. He cheered up quickly with a little attention.

“Do you and Corwin normally fight like that?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Usually we’re okay. He just gets in these moods. I actually like him a lot, when he’s being cool.”

“What constitutes ‘being cool,’ out of curiosity?”

“Joking and stuff. He can be funny. And he’s hot to do scenes with.” He paused. “I guess I make it worse. He pisses me off, I fight right back.”

“Which is probably exactly what he wants.”

George snorted. “Yeah.”

We talked for a while about George’s new job. He seemed uneasy at first, as though any talk of jobs might upset me, but opened up after a few minutes. Eventually I went down to the kitchen to start dinner. Tried not to feel useless. If I’d still been employed, I would have been on my lunch break now. It was Friday, so a group of us would have gone to the corner deli and stayed away too long, letting the phones ring. I closed my eyes briefly. Whatever I’d thought of the job, the pay had been decent, and working beat the hell out of feeling like a bum.

Around five, Terrence came home. He found me reading in the study and asked if I knew where Corwin was. I explained what had happened.

Terrence sighed. “Jeez. I’m sorry, Mike.”

“Nothing to be sorry about. We’ll take care of it when he gets home.”

Terrence nodded slowly.

“You’re not sure about this,” I said.

“I just don’t see how it’s gonna work. You went to punish him and he bolted. Does he really want this or not?”

“He wants it. But I think he needs some time to sort through things before he gives himself over.”

Terrence didn’t look convinced.

George and Jake were out for the night, and Dave had already eaten, so dinner was just Ter and me. It reminded me of evenings we’d spent together in Toledo. After a glass or two of wine, Ter would usually start in on how he wanted to get out of the firm and go somewhere else. For the first time since I’d been fired, it hit me that I had options. That I could go anywhere now, provided I wanted the hassle of finding a new apartment and uprooting my life.

Maybe I’d give away all of my earthly possessions and trek across the country. Maybe I’d go back to school.

Maybe I’d get back into TF play professionally. Some of the purses at those nerd tournaments were more than I’d have made in a year.

Maybe I needed to stop thinking about it.

I went back to the study with my book. Around ten, I heard a car pull into the drive. The screen slammed, and I heard low voices in the kitchen. Then the voices stopped, though I could still hear some moving and shuffling.

Ten minutes later, Corwin walked into the study.

He shut the door behind him, approached the desk, and set down a foot long elm switch. It was stripped smooth. I looked at it for a moment, then

looked at him. He didn't look amused or frightened or angry. He didn't look anything at all.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly.

I put my book down. "Tell me why."

"I earned a punishment, and instead of taking it, I left."

I stared at him until he fidgeted. I noticed the pulse jerking in his neck, and I leaned back and motioned for him to sit in the chair on the other side of the desk. He did, clasping his hands between his thighs. "Why did you leave?" I asked.

He sighed. "Can we just do this already?"

I kept my tone low and even. "You're in enough trouble as it is. I suggest you answer my question."

"I left because I was pissed," he mumbled. "And I didn't want you to take a switch to my ass."

"Is it the idea of punishment itself, or the implement that scares you?"

"I didn't say it scared me," he snapped.

"All right," I said.

"I'm not scared."

"I hear you."

He took a deep breath. "I don't even know you. What if it's too much?"

"What if the spanking's too much, you mean?"

"You don't love me like Ter. Ter would stop if I couldn't take anymore."

"So would I."

"Really?"

I leaned back. "This works best if you trust me enough to punish you as I see fit. That said, you're right. We don't know each other. So if it's too much, safe word."

“You think I’m a jerk.”

“I think you need to work on impulse control.”

He cracked a smile. “No sh—I mean, no kidding. Are you one of those Tops that doesn’t like swearing?”

I couldn’t help but return the smile. “I prefer you be polite when we’re dealing with something like this. But I’d be a hypocrite if I told you never to swear.” I indicated the elm branch. “You brought me a switch. I take that to mean you accept your punishment?”

He nodded.

“You’re going to be very sorry when we’re done. But it won’t be more than you can take. Understand?”

“Yeah. Yes, Sir.”

“We’ll use the chair you’re sitting on. Up, please.”

He stood. His movements were less graceful than they’d been during our first meeting in the kitchen. I sat in his chair, which was armless and would give me plenty of room to swing.

“Bring me the switch, please.”

He tried to pick it up off the desk, and it immediately slipped from his fingers.

Not scared, my ass.

He got ahold of it, clutched it for a moment, and then handed it to me. I thanked him and tucked it under my right thigh. “Take down your pants, Corwin.”

He undid his fly and pushed his jeans down.

“Briefs too.”

He closed his eyes, hesitated for a second. Then he took his underwear down. His cock was flushed and half hard.

I patted my lap. “Over my knee.”

He took a step forward, hobbled by his pants. He paused. “Um—sorry, which side?”

“Head goes this way.” I indicated my left side. He climbed over my thighs, cock rubbing against my jeans as he tried to get comfortable. I raised my right leg and pitched him forward a little so his ass was higher.

He had a nice ass—smooth, taut, and small. The curves were subtle, and the muscles were hard as I ran my palm over each cheek. There was a shiver in his breath. “What is this spanking for, Corwin?”

He shifted a little, and I put an arm around his hips to steady him. “I threw George’s book and yelled at him. Then I left instead of doing what you told me.”

“What did I tell you to do?” I left my hand on his ass, hoping the weight of it would focus him.

“You told me to go cut a switch and bring it to you.”

“Why did I ask you to do that?”

“So you could punish me.” His voice was small.

“Yes.” I gave him a light tap with my palm and watched his muscles clench. “How do you feel right now?”

“Are you seriously gonna interview me while I’m over your knee?”

I gave him another warning pat. “Let’s try that again.”

“I feel pretty okay,” he said.

I waited.

“I mean, blood’s rushing to my head and I’m hard as fuck and I think this is really gonna hurt. But I feel okay about it.”

“What makes you feel okay?”

He twisted, stomach muscles moving against my thighs. “I’ve waited for this a long time. And you know what you’re doing.”

I raised my hand and smacked him once. The sound tore through the study. He jerked but stayed silent. I smacked him again, harder. I heard a small catch of breath.

“I know what I’m doing, huh?”

“Yes, Sir.” His voice was tight.

“Do you know what you’re doing?”

I felt him start to answer, then stop. I struck him sharply where his left buttock met his thigh, and he inhaled through his teeth.

“What do you mean, Sir?” he asked.

“You’re sure this is the kind of relationship you want with Terrence?”

I whacked him once on each sit spot.

“Ow. God. I don’t know.”

Another slap.

“I want this!” Another hard smack in the same spot. He tensed, wriggling a little. “I do. But I don’t know... maybe not with Terrence.”

I spanked faster, alternating cheeks, until he squirmed and whimpered and finally tried to swerve away from my hand.

“Hold still.” I tightened my grip around his waist and swatted the tops of his ass-cheeks.

His cock was still rigid against my thigh.

“It hurts,” he said through gritted teeth.

“You earned it. The way you spoke to George, and what you did with his book were immature and unfair.” I delivered three slaps to the exact same spot, making him moan. “Tomorrow you’ll apologize to George. Understood?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“I will not tolerate behavior like that from you. You can do better.”

He let out a high-pitched cry as I gave the backs of his thighs a hard volley.



I stopped spanking and rubbed his rosy skin, ignoring his hiss of protest. “Stand up,” I said.

He got off my knee and stood. His face was as flushed as his ass, his eyes pink too, though he wasn’t crying yet.

“Go stand in that corner, please.” I pointed.

He stared.

“Now.” I swatted him.

He turned and shuffled to the corner.

I had him wait there for five minutes, while I read at the desk. Okay, pretended to read. All I could think about was what he’d confessed. “*I want this... but maybe not with Terrence.*” There was a wet spot on my jeans from his cock, and I wanted to know why it felt so right to have him over my lap, why it was so satisfying that he’d come to me, brought me the switch even after he’d fled. Even though he’d been scared.

After three minutes, he was fidgeting so much that I walked over and gave him two more swats.

He hunched and fell still.

I stayed behind him for a moment, not sure what to do. His breathing was harsh, ragged. I wanted to touch him, but I didn’t want to mix sex with this punishment. Didn’t want to send him the wrong message, even though I wasn’t sure at this point what the wrong message would be. Or the right one.

I placed a hand on the small of his back. Reassuring, I hoped, but also intimate. He tensed only for a second, then let out a long breath, pushing back slightly against me.

“Go get Terrence,” I said softly. “Bring him back here.”

Corwin turned to me. “He’s in bed. He has to work half a day tomorrow.”

“I realize that. Go get him.”

Corwin stepped out of the corner. His cock hadn’t softened. He started to pull his pants up.

“Leave them down.”

“What?”

“I said leave your pants down.”

“What if I run into somebody besides Ter?”

I raised an eyebrow at him. He dropped his pants.

“Yes, Sir,” he whispered.

“Good boy.”

He shuffled by me with his pants around his ankles. I saw his ass clench as he passed me, and I smiled to myself.

A few minutes later, Corwin returned with Terrence. Corwin’s head was down, and his ears were as flushed as his ass.

“Hey, Terrence,” I said.

“Hey, Mike.”

“Doubtless you’re wondering why you’ve been dragged out of bed.”

Terrence rubbed the back of his head. “Corwin said he’s being punished. I’ve made it clear to him I’m displeased both with his behavior and with having to get up to deal with this.”

“I apologize,” I said.

“Not your fault at all.” Terrence glanced at Corwin. “If somebody had behaved himself this afternoon, it wouldn’t be necessary.”

“If George hadn’t—” Corwin started.

“Young man,” Terrence said sharply. Corwin jumped and looked at him. “You know I work tomorrow?”

I bit back a smile. Terrence was better at this than he gave himself credit for.

“Yes, Sir.” Corwin’s voice was soft again, but there was a hint of sullenness in his tone.

“What time do I have to get up?”

“Six thirty. But you’ll stay in bed until a quarter to if I blow you.”

“Do you think that’s funny?”

“No, Sir.”

“Sleep is valuable to me. I do not expect to have to deal with anything like this again. Do you understand me?”

Corwin nodded. “Yes, Sir.”

“All right,” I said. Terrence’s scolding was effective and probably quite sincere, but I didn’t want to push Corwin anywhere too negative during his first spanking. “Corwin’s done very well so far,” I told Terrence. “Corwin, I’d like you to bend over the desk to take the remainder of your punishment.”

Corwin hesitated only a second, then went to the desk.

“The center there is fine. Bend over. Legs shoulder-width apart, hands flat on the desk. Butt out.”

Corwin assumed the position, every muscle visibly tense.

Terrence and I watched him for a moment. His breathing was shallow, and he fidgeted slightly. I knew he wanted to know what we were doing behind him.

“Take a deep breath,” I said.

He obeyed.

I stood, picked up the switch, and walked to his left side. I expected him to tense again as I came near, but he remained fairly relaxed.

“Terrence,” I said. “Why don’t you go around to the other side of the desk and hold Corwin’s hands?”

Terrence glanced at me questioningly. I nodded. Terrence walked around, sat in the large office chair, and took Corwin’s wrists as though he were restraining him.

“Just for support,” I said. “Corwin is going to hold position on his own.”

Terrence moved his hands down, lacing his fingers with Corwin's. Corwin gave a small, shuddering breath and mumbled something I couldn't hear.

"What's that?" I asked.

"I hate this," Corwin said.

"Why?" I didn't really think he did, but I was interested in what he might say.

"I feel stupid."

"You're not stupid."

Terrence squeezed Corwin's hands. "I'm here with you, pup."

I rubbed his lower back. "You're doing well, Corwin. I know you'll remember this."

"Yes, Sir."

I passed the switch through the air a couple of times, watching Corwin flinch at the sound. "Eight strokes. This will sting," I said. "Hold onto Terrence, and cry or yell as much as you need to."

I didn't give him time to reply. I drew the switch back and delivered the first stroke to the crest of his ass. He gasped and his knees turned inward as though he longed to press his legs together. But he held position.

I rubbed the thin red welt briskly with my left hand, diffusing the pain, then stepped back and landed stroke two an inch lower. I rubbed him after each cut of the switch, easing the burn and reassuring him this wasn't done in anger. His breathing grew shallower, and his grip on Terrence's hands looked painful.

Stroke four brought a yelp. Stroke five, a sob.

Then he started begging.

"Please, Mike, please. I'm sorry."

I rubbed circles on his ass, feeling the heat, the raised welts. "I know."

"I won't do it again. I won't!"

“Shh. It’s almost over.”

I landed the sixth stroke on the lower curve of his ass, forcing him onto his toes. He gave a strangled whimper and squeezed Terrence’s hands even tighter. “No more, Ter. Please, tell him no more. I’ll be good. Fuck, it hurts.”

He was still holding back—stifling sobs and letting begging substitute for genuine surrender.

I whipped him again right in the crease where his buttocks met his thighs. He let out a miserable groan, but he didn’t make an attempt to break position. In fact, his body was amazingly still.

“Mike,” he said softly. I thought he was going to beg again, but he was quiet after he said my name. I tapped him a few times, listening to the soft *flick flick* of the switch against his skin, then delivered the final stroke to the tops of his thighs. It left behind a livid welt. He clenched his ass, fighting the pain, and then the sobs came in earnest.

“There you go,” I said quietly. “Let it all out.”

I rubbed his ass, soothing the worst of the sting, then moved my hand up under his shirt to stroke his back. Such smooth skin and hard muscle. So thin, the bones of his spine protruding beneath my fingers.

Terrence was running his thumbs over Corwin’s hands. He looked pale. “It’s all right, Cor. All done.”

Terrence glanced at me, and I nodded.

He released Corwin’s hands and came around to the front of the desk. He helped Corwin up and gathered Corwin against him, rubbing his shoulders. “You did really well,” he murmured.

After a minute, I moved closer. I wasn’t sure where I fit in anymore. I’d done my job, punished Corwin, and I supposed Ter could take it from here. Still, I wanted to stay long enough to make sure Corwin was okay.

Corwin suddenly wrenched himself out of Ter’s arms and leaned against me, issuing a series of quick, shuddery sobs. I glanced at Terrence, worried he’d be offended. He was watching Corwin, his expression unreadable.

“I’m sorry,” Corwin said into my shirt. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine.” I wrapped an arm around him. “Over and forgiven.”

“You’re sure?” he asked.

My chest tightened. “Of course.”

Ter and I led him over to the couch and helped him sit with his weight on one hip, his body resting against mine, his legs folded in Ter’s lap. We both stroked him until he calmed.

He swiped his eyes with the heel of his hand. “I’m fine,” he said. He sounded like he was reassuring himself.

“It’s time for bed,” Terrence said.

“I’m fine, really. Sorry. I don’t know why—”

“Let it out,” I told him.

He stiffened suddenly and pulled away from me, as though he thought he’d done something he shouldn’t.

“It’s okay,” I said, so quietly I wasn’t sure he’d heard.

His gaze met mine for just a second, and then he threw his arms around me, squeezing me hard. I stopped breathing for a moment, just felt the weight, the warmth of him, the tiny hitches of his body, the beating of his heart against my chest, his tears soaking through my shirt.

I put my arms around him and held him loosely, rubbing circles on his lower back.

I caught Terrence’s eye. Ter just smiled. There was a little bit of longing in his expression, but the smile was genuine, and I bent my head next to Corwin’s and whispered, “Shh.”

Corwin loosened his grip on me but wouldn’t sit up. Finally he did, and he stood and left the room without another glance at me.

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The next morning, Corwin did his level best to avoid me. He ate breakfast standing at the counter, ignoring Dave's jokes about some local news story, and when he saw me come in, he quickly put his bowl in the sink. I watched him stare at it for a second, and then he picked it up and started washing it. I almost laughed.

I waited until Dave left the room and said, "I gave Ter some aloe cream. Have him put it on you. You'll be less sore."

"I don't need it," Corwin muttered.

He headed for the door.

"Corwin?"

He hesitated.

"I'd love to see your decks sometime. All of them."

He turned. For a second I thought I'd only managed to piss him off further. Then he grinned, a smile that changed not just his expression, but also the way he held himself, the energy of the room.

"Now?" he asked.

"If you've got time."

He raced upstairs to retrieve his box of cards, then met me in the living room. Two hours later, Terrence found us in the middle of our third game. Corwin had lent me his Sacred Seas deck, which he'd spent the last six months building. It was a deck I'd never have come up with myself, but it somehow worked perfectly for the way I liked to play. Corwin was right, it was more geared toward offense, but there were some good defensive moves I could make as well. I found I wasn't nearly as interested in attacking him as I was in seeing what he'd throw at me and figuring out how I could counter it.

"Oh dear God," Terrence said. "I told you you'd get along."

Corwin pumped a fist in the air. "Nerds unite!"

"No kidding," Ter said dryly.

Corwin looked so happy I almost felt bad about what I had to do. “Noooo!” he cried, when I played the Mermaid of Kur and cast a sleep spell on his Demon Troubadour. “Why would you do that?”

“You built the deck,” I said. “Can’t blame me for rocking it.”

“Oh well.” He set down a creature I didn’t recognize—a sort of bull mixed with a snake, but with a single horn on its head. “I’ll just have the Cornus block the spell. *And* draw a new card.”

“You jerk!”

“I’m just naturally on fucking fire. Can’t blame me for rocking it.”

Terrence shook his head. “I’m going to take a nap. You dorks have fun.”

“We will,” Corwin said.

We finished the game twenty minutes later. “Jeez.” I sat back. “I could get used to being unemployed.”

Corwin gathered the cards. “Thanks for playing with me. You’re way more fun than the guys I play with in town.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“They all *look* like nerds. And they talk about boobs way too much. Probably because they’ve never actually seen any in real life.”

“Now, now.”

“Come on. You know the kind of guy I’m talking about. The horny nerd.”

“I *am* a horny nerd.”

“Yeah, but you’re hot. And you don’t talk about boobs.”

“Well... boobs aren’t really my style.”

He placed the cards in the box. “My ass didn’t hurt at all while I was playing. I forgot all about it.”

“Is it that bad?”

“No. I mean, I’m sore, but I don’t mind.”



“You should find Ter. Try the aloe.”

He nodded.

“Or I could do it, since Ter’s napping.”

Corwin glanced up. I instantly felt guilty. If I’d thought Ter would mind, I wouldn’t have offered. But still... I didn’t know quite what was happening to me. I looked at Corwin and felt somehow pleased, sad, and lonely all at once. I wished I could ask him what he was thinking. How he’d felt last night when I’d spanked him. Why he’d left afterward. Whether or not he’d gotten what he needed.

I saw him swallow. Watched the shallow rise and fall of his chest. He looked away. “That’s okay,” he said. “I’m okay.”

Shit. I’d freaked him out.

“Was last night what you expected?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I don’t know. It was a lot.”

“Too much?”

“No. Just... I don’t get why I cried. Why it mattered so much.”

“The spanking?”

“After.”

He didn’t elaborate. I should have pushed him. It was my job to help both of us understand what had happened. But I remembered the “after” too. I remembered holding him. Whispering to him. I remembered him boneless and pressed against me.

He packed up his cards and took them upstairs. A few minutes later I heard his car start.

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The next couple of days passed without event. I helped Dave with preparations for an upcoming motorcycle convention he was attending. I

looked for jobs online. I played way too many games of TF with Corwin and decided I was obsessed with his Sacred Seas deck.

“You can have it,” he said.

“No.”

“I’m serious. Keep it. I’ve got other decks.”

“But this deck is badass.”

“That’s why I want you to have it.”

“It must have cost a ton to get all these cards.”

“Mike. I *want* you to have it.”

It was tempting. Not just because I loved the deck, but because... I’d have something to remember Corwin by? No. Not gonna go there. “I don’t play anymore,” I told him. “Back home, I mean.”

Saturday night I was in my room when there was a knock on my door. Corwin poked his head in. I was in my pajama pants and shirtless, and I felt awkward, like I shouldn’t be letting him see me half naked—until I saw he was wearing only briefs under his not-long-enough T-shirt. “What’s up?”

“They’re doing a scene in Jake’s room,” he said. “It wasn’t my thing. So I escaped.”

“Escaped?”

He grinned. “Can I stay with you while they play?”

“I’m...” *I’m busy? Terrified? Being alone with you to play The Foresworn is one thing, but alone in a bedroom with you is too much?* “Do they know why you left?”

“They probably haven’t even noticed I’m gone.”

I frowned at him. “If a scene was going badly for you, you need to talk to them about it.”

“Hey, Mr. Sanctimonious.” He sidled closer to the bed. “I don’t want to talk to them.”

“Why not?”

He shrugged. “Don’t feel like it.”

There was a knock on my door. “Mike?” Ter’s voice. “Sorry to bother you. Is Corwin here?”

I looked at Corwin and lifted my eyebrows.

He sighed and walked to the door. “Hey,” he said, as he opened it to Terrence.

Ter was wearing a rumpled, unbuttoned work shirt and a pair of backward pajama pants. He’d obviously dressed in a hurry to come down here. “We didn’t know where you’d run off to. Is something wrong?”

“I don’t feel like playing tonight. Can I hang out with Mike a while?”

Terrence glanced at me. “If it’s all right with Mike.”

“It’s all right with him,” Corwin said before I could open my mouth.

“You sure nothing’s wrong?”

“Yeah. I’m not upset or anything. I just don’t want to play.”

Ter leaned against the doorframe. “All right. If you change your mind, you know where to find us.” He headed off through the kitchen.

Corwin shut the door and turned to me. “See? It’s fine. And see how much he misses me? Like, not at all.”

“I have a feeling you like when people drop everything to check up on you.”

A shadow passed over his face. Then he tried to smile. “Yeah, maybe.”

“And I *didn’t* say it was all right for you to stay.”

“I’ll be quiet.”

I patted the bed. He sat beside me. There were goose bumps on his arms. “Cold?”

“It’s freezing up there. They’ve got the AC cranked.”

I stood and headed for the closet. “I ought to warm your backside. Barging in here like this.”

I glanced at him over my shoulder. He was sitting perfectly still.

There were different things brats needed out of discipline. Some needed to be taken in hand in a way that was harsh, uncompromising, and convincing. They didn’t want comfort after a spanking. They wanted to feel thoroughly shamed by a punishment.

Others wanted to know they were cared about every step of the way. They wanted to be reassured when they were nervous, praised when they took a punishment well. I’d been like that. Needy, I’d worried at first, until I’d seen how much the guy spanking me liked giving that reassurance. Eventually I’d realized my own truest fantasy wasn’t to receive discipline and comfort, but to provide it.

I couldn’t quite figure out where Corwin fit. He seemed to benefit from strictness, to like being forced. But he wanted comfort too, even if it scared him to accept it.

I waited for him to respond, but he was waiting for me—either to make good on my threat, or to acknowledge I’d been teasing.

“But I’m feeling merciful tonight.” I grabbed a pair of my sweatpants and an oversized sweatshirt and tossed them on the bed. “Here.”

He dressed without a word. The clothes were way too big, and I laughed looking at him.

“That’ll have to do.”

He smiled and brought his knees up to his chest, pulling the cuffs of the sweatpants over his bare feet.

“Warmer?” I asked.

He nodded. “Thanks.”

I sat with him for a minute.

“Still a little cold,” he said finally.

I gently put an arm around his shoulders and eased him against me. It felt good to hold him.

“Mike?”

“Yeah?”

“I like you.”

“I like you too.”

“Just as a friend?”

“You’re very attractive.”

“I know.”

“And your humility is nearly irresistible.”

He laughed.

“But you and Terrence—”

“We’re not a thing,” Corwin said. “I mean, he’s my Top, and I love him, but we’re... it’s temporary.”

“I see.”

“He even says so. He’s gonna get rid of me someday.”

“I doubt he says it like that.”

“We both know it, though.” Corwin leaned closer and nestled against my chest. “And he knows I like you. I told him.”

My heart thudded. “What’d he say?”

“Not to pester you.” He paused. “I was thinking—if you did like me, we could try playing together. See what happens.”

“Hmm.”

He hurried on. “With the other guys, I mean, it’s fun, sometimes, but it’s also, like, they were this family, and now I’m here, and... um. I feel like they kind of want me to fit with what they’ve already got going. But with you, we’d both be figuring it out.”

“How do you like to play?” I asked, before I could stop myself.

“I do lots of stuff. Blowjobs, bondage, gags... the guys like gagging me—wonder why. I even don’t mind enemas, if you’re nice about it.”

I chuckled.

“What?” he asked, looking at me.

“You’re a sweetheart.”

“You think so?” He seemed genuinely surprised.

“What about spanking?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Sometimes. But I don’t really like pretending. I want it to be punishment, like the other night. Floggers are pretty hot, though. And sex, of course. You can fuck me any way you want.”

“I think,” I said softly, “it might be a good idea to know each other a little better first.”

The change in his expression was subtle, but I caught it.

“I mean it,” I said. “I’m not rejecting you. I just think we should wait a little bit. Talk to Terrence. Decide what you and he want to do about your relationship.”

“I’m hot,” he complained, pulling free of me and yanking off the sweatshirt. He was breathing hard, his chest rising and falling under his thin T-shirt. He tossed the sweatshirt on the floor. “There *is* no relationship. Ter doesn’t want to have a relationship. You won’t either, when you know me better.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m too much to deal with.”

“I doubt that.”

“You won’t like me much when you know more. Ter doesn’t.”

“Know more about what?”

He pulled up his T-shirt and showed me three long scratches running from his armpit to the end of his rib cage.

“Where’d those come from?” My first thought was Monster.

“Me.” He glanced at me and yanked down his shirt. “It doesn’t matter what you think,” he snapped.

“Let me see,” I said. I eased his arm out of the way and lifted his shirt again. He closed his eyes and inhaled, sucking his stomach in and pushing his ribs out. The skin over the bones was smooth and pale, and a spot near his navel pulsed as he held his breath. I touched him lightly, just underneath the scratches, and he exhaled as though I’d pressed a button. “When did this happen?”

“Last night.”

“Are you keeping them clean?”

“What’s the point?”

I took hold of his shirt. He flinched as I tugged the fabric over his head, leaving his hair crackling with static. He kept his arm close to his body, covering the scratches.

“Why?” I asked softly.

“I don’t know,” he muttered. “I like doing it. Ter says I should stop.”

“What do you like? The pain? The marks?”

“Both.” He took a shallow breath. “Sometimes I get marked in scenes. How’s it any different?”

“Does that help, too?”

“A little bit. Do you think I’m sick?”

I shook my head and put a hand between his shoulders.

“Ter used to like me a lot,” he said. “But after he found out, I don’t think he was too excited about me anymore.”

“Terrence cares about you.”

“He just can’t keep me.” Corwin wiped his nose with the back of his hand. “I want to go.” He tried to stand. I caught his wrist. “I need to go out.”

“Lie down,” I said. “I’m gonna clean those and we’ll talk more.”

He tried to pull away, but I held on. “Go away,” he snapped.

“Corwin. Stop fighting me.”

He elbowed me—gently enough that I knew he wasn’t really fighting, that he wanted to be stopped. I stood, pulling him with me, and patted his ass. Just a warning, nothing more. He jumped forward and twisted in my grasp. I swatted him once, then let him go and pointed to the bed.

“Stretch out.”

“Fuck you.”

I bent him against my hip and gave him a few more light swats until he moaned with frustration.

“Don’t you turn against me too, Mike!”

I eased him up, and we faced each other. “You know full well I’m not against you. What do you mean by that?”

“I don’t have anyone,” he said, voice cracking a little. “No one really cares. They just pretend. You have no idea how it feels to be this fucking *alone*.”

I held him firmly. “You’re not alone. You have Ter and Dave and Jake and George and me.”

“You don’t give a shit. Neither do I.” He tried to push me off him. I didn’t let go.

“Ready to settle down?” I asked. I could feel his sides moving in and out too rapidly. I wouldn’t push him if he didn’t want to be pushed. I wanted him to get what he needed out of this.

“Make me,” he whispered. “Please.”



The next time he tried to jerk free, I sat on the edge of the bed and pulled him between my thighs, clamping his legs with my own. I untied the sweatpants and pulled them down, then bent him over my left knee.

“You need to listen, Corwin,” I said, smacking the seat of his tight black briefs. “I want to help, but you need to let me.”

I carried on for a moment, stinging him until his grunts of protest turned to whimpers.

“No, wait,” he begged, as I slid his underwear down. He put one hand behind him, but I pinned it against his back.

“Enough,” I said. “Relax.”

My plan was to stop once his ass had a little color, but it was obvious he was getting something major out of this spanking. The tension had left him, and he was quiet, face buried in the comforter, making no attempt to pull away as I layered circuit after circuit of what were actually very light swats. Occasionally he rubbed himself against my leg. “That’s right,” I whispered, letting him know it was all right to enjoy this. He sighed as I went to work on his thighs, first one and then the other.

I stopped when he was flushed from his hips almost to his knees. I set my palm on the hot skin. “Very good,” I said quietly. “You took that so well.”

“Shit. Mike...”

I stroked him, feeling the tiny bumps my hand had raised on his ass.

“Hurts.”

“I know.” It couldn’t really have hurt much, but I knew what he meant. I’d hurt like that too. I gathered him onto the bed with me and lay beside him, just holding him.

“You’re mad.” He pushed away until he could see my face. His was blotchy, but there was no sign of tears. “You’re mad I hurt myself.”

“Not true. That spanking was for not listening to me.” I paused when I saw his jaw tighten. “Do you wish I was mad that you hurt yourself?”

He tried to roll away.

“Answer the question, please.”

He shook his head. “Not sure.”

“I’m not pleased about it. But I’m not angry.”

“You want me to be safe,” he whispered hopefully.

“I want you to be happy.”

“I can’t.” He sounded anguished. “Only sometimes. I can’t just be that, Mike.”

“I know. Lie here and be good while I get some stuff to clean you up.”

I brought him a glass of water, too, which he chugged. The scratches weren’t as deep as I’d initially thought, and they looked like they’d heal just fine. Corwin lay silent, flinching a little when I put the peroxide-soaked cotton ball on his skin.

“It won’t hurt,” I said.

“I know,” he replied, a little defensive.

I swabbed the three marks.

“This stops,” I said, calmly but firmly, as I pulled his shirt back down. “If you’re thinking about hurting yourself from now on, you find me or Ter. We can give you safe pain, if that’s what you need. Got it?”

“Yes, Sir.”

I climbed into bed, stretching out beside him and pulling the covers over both of us.

“I can stay?” he whispered.

“Go to sleep.”

He lay quiet for a moment, then rolled to face me. I saw his neck extend, his face moving closer to mine, and I almost couldn’t make myself stop him. I wanted so badly to know what it felt like to kiss him, to explore his mouth

with my tongue, to touch his whole fucking body. Just in time, I got a palm on his chest and pushed him away.

“Sleep,” I repeated, trying not to acknowledge my pounding heart, my hardening cock.

“You don’t want to?” he asked.

*Fuck, kid.*

“I don’t know if Ter’s okay with this.”

“Why is it Ter’s business? Ter has George and Jake and Dave. Why can’t I have someone too?”

“I told you what I want. I want you to sleep. I want us to think about this.”

He sat up. Stared at me. “You know,” he said, “I get why you’re a Top or whatever. You’re good at being bossy, and you sound like you’re in charge. And you’re, like, hot and you know when to be nice and you make people want to listen to you. But there needs to be a balance, you know? You don’t get to tell everyone what to do about everything all the time.”

“I hardly think that’s what I do.”

“I’m just saying I don’t really care what you want right now. Because I want something too.”

“Corwin...”

But he was already out of bed, striding toward the door.

“Come back here.”

“No,” he said. And left.

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I didn’t see Corwin until just before lunch the next day. The others went out to some seafood place I wasn’t into, so I shut myself in my room and job-hunted until I heard sounds in the kitchen. I figured it was Corwin, and part of me was nervous about whatever conversation we needed to have, so I didn’t

go out right away. I hid in my room with my laptop and listened to the whirring of the blender.

I finally steeled myself and went out. I was prepared to apologize. Prepared to admit that yes, I was bossy, and yes, sometimes it was hard for me to listen instead of giving orders, and yeah, I knew what he wanted, and I wanted it too.

Then I saw what he was putting in the blender.

TF cards. He was sitting on the counter, dropping them in one by one. And not just any cards.

“You blended the Sacred Seas deck?” I shouted.

He pressed the on button, and the blender roared.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I demanded when he turned it off. I looked at the gray pulp inside, horrified.

“A lot of shit!” he said, dropping in the Mermaid of Kur and starting the machine up again.

“Turn that off right now!”

He pretended not to hear me.

I strode over and turned the blender off. He calmly pulled it off the stand, admiring the contents.

“That deck was—it was fucking *perfect*,” I said.

“And now it’s mush. Sacred Mush.” He held the blender out toward me. “Want some?” He swirled the glop inside.

I stared at him. Then I turned and started to leave.

“Where are you going?” he demanded.

“I need to get out for a while.”

“What, you’re not going to punish me?”

I didn’t answer.

“Mike! Come back here, or I swear I’ll pour this all over your damn bed!”

I left the kitchen, crossed the living room, and went out the front door. Let him just try pouring that shit on my bed. I'd make sitting down a personal trial for him for the next two weeks. The passive-aggressive little punk.

It wasn't just the deck. It wasn't just him. It was me too. I was twenty-nine years old and I'd thought I knew the right way to do things. I wasn't supposed to get fired from my job. I wasn't supposed to be blindsided by my feelings for someone I barely knew. I was supposed to have life figured out. I was supposed to be in *control*.

Corwin said he wanted me. He also said he felt alone and like he didn't think he had anything permanent with Terrence. So what was I to him? Another chance to be taken care of? Did he even give a shit who I was—or was he so desperate not to sleep by himself that any bed would do?

Our TF connection had almost convinced me I meant something more to him than a source of attention, but then he'd blended the deck. The deck he'd tried to give me.

The Sacred Fucking Seas.

*That's why he blended that deck. To hurt you. To send you a message.*

*"Because I want something too,"* he'd said last night.

Fuck.

Should I be flattered or furious?

I was gonna go with furious.

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"You two are awful quiet tonight," Jake commented.

I refused to look at Corwin. We'd been trying to out-sullen each other since dinner began.

"How was work?" I asked Jake.

Jake nodded. "Not bad. There's a new copier at the office, which is supposed to make our lives easier, except no one can figure out how to work it."

Corwin reached across the table suddenly and grabbed the salt from in front of Dave, knocking the pepper over in the process. He began shaking it over his food so hard the salt scattered everywhere. Dave calmly reached out and righted the pepper. Corwin leaned forward to slam the salt back on the table, intentionally tipping the pepper again in the process. This time Dave snagged his wrist.

“Let go!” Corwin snapped, pulling back.

“Easy,” Dave said. I could see Dave wasn’t holding him hard. “Pick up the pepper.”

“You’re not my Dom! None of you are, not really.” Corwin jerked his head at me. “Especially not *him*.”

“And you’re not a six-year-old,” George pointed out. “So calm the fuck down.”

“Corwin,” Dave didn’t raise his voice, but there was an unmistakable warning in it. “Pick it up.”

Dave let go, and Corwin sulkily repositioned the shaker.

All at once I felt a surge of jealousy I didn’t understand. Part of me missed my days as a brat. Missed having something to push against, the solid reassurance of a Top who wouldn’t let me get away with any bullshit. I felt strange and out of sorts. I didn’t have a job, I wasn’t a part of this group, this weird little family; I was a *guest*. And the one person at this table I did feel a genuine connection with hated my guts. I grabbed the potatoes, slopped them onto my plate, not caring that some of them hit the table. I set the casserole dish heavily on the potholder.

“Uh, Mike?” Terrence said.

“What?” I demanded.

“Everything all right?”

“Everything’s fine. Except that *somebody* blended his Sacred Seas deck.”

“*Somebody* doesn’t give a shit about somebody else’s feelings,” Corwin shot back.

“Somebody cares enough about your feelings and other peoples’ not to go rushing into anything!”

“Guys,” Jake said, “can we do this after dinner?”

I scooted my chair back, wiped my mouth, and stood. “I’m going for a walk.”

“Me too.” Corwin stood.

We both clomped out the back door. Monster barked, pulling eagerly on his chain.

“I’m walking this way.” Corwin pointed to the left. “So you can go that way.” He jerked his thumb right.

“I want to see the garden.”

“Fine. I’ll go this way.”

I headed left, and he went right.

My anger faded a little as I walked. I knew I was being ridiculous, but it felt good to indulge the brat side I’d walled up for so many years. After a few minutes, I heard footsteps behind me. “I want to see the garden too,” Corwin muttered.

We walked side by side to the garden.

“Zucchini’s coming up,” he said brusquely.

“And the peppers.”

We paused.

“We were pretty idiotic back there,” he said.

“No kidding,” I replied, almost before he’d finished.

He looked at me and laughed suddenly. “I didn’t know you could make a scene like that.”

“Surprise.”

He shook his head and stepped closer to me. His shoulder brushed mine. “I didn’t know you’d get so mad about me blending the deck.”

“It’s a good deck.”

“And a good blender.”

I snorted.

“The blades are probably all dull now,” he said.

We were quiet a moment. “I’m sorry about last night,” I said finally.

“Me too. And about today.” He glanced around. “Hold on.” He walked over to the elm tree and reached up to grab one of the branches.

“Hey,” I said, as he broke off a long twig. “No.”

He brought it over to me, pulling the leaves off as he walked. “Here.”

I shook my head. Took the switch from him, snapped it in half, and tossed it on the ground. “I’m not going to punish you.”

“How come?”

“Because I am bossy. And I don’t always know when to turn it off. And I just spanked you last night.”

“That wasn’t, like...”

“I know. But I don’t think what we’re dealing with here is gonna be solved with a spanking.”

He was quiet for a minute. “You said I like attention. You’re right, but I don’t want people to drop everything to deal with me. That sounds so pathetic. I just... I want them to give a fuck when I get upset.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

“Which is stupid, because the stuff I’m getting upset about doesn’t matter.” He looked at me pleadingly. “I just like to know someone hears me.”



“That’s not a bad thing.” I reached out and stroked the curls at the nape of his neck. He breathed out. “If you like attention, I don’t mind giving it.”

“You don’t?”

“It’s a game, right? It’s roles we play. You perform, and so do I. But we get something out of it for real, too. I really do like taking care of brats. And you...”

“I really like being one.”

“So we’re a good match.” My heart pounded.

“You don’t think I’m stupid, Mike?”

“Not at all.”

“I don’t have some kind of Daddy fetish, all right?”

“Who said you did?”

“I just don’t want you to get the wrong idea. I’m not trying to pretend to be some little kid.”

“I’m not gonna treat you like one.”

“I’m gonna act like one sometimes, though.”

“I’m gonna spank you when you do.”

He stared at me a moment, then shook his head. “This is messed up.”

“Not at all.”

He leaned forward and kissed me. Soft and sweet. He drew back slowly and raised his gaze to meet mine. “I like you.”

I smiled. Ran my thumb across the nape of his neck and leaned forward for another kiss. “I like you too,” I murmured, just before my lips touched his.

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The next two weeks passed quickly.

I had one phone interview I was pretty sure wouldn’t turn into anything. Corwin made a thousand bucks painting a few rooms in some rich lady’s

summer home in Brookside. I tried not to feel inadequate when he and the others were gone during the day. I took lots of walks and worked out in the basement. Did whatever chores I could think of. When Corwin was home, we worked on building a new TF deck together, often in the shed or in my bedroom. But somehow, no matter what we sat down to do, we ended up making out.

Ter had figured out pretty quickly that something was going on, and to my relief, he'd given us his blessing. "I knew you guys would be a good match. I seriously knew it. Not just because of the nerdy card game, but just... something about the two of you." He clasped his hands in front of him like a proud mother. "It's perfect."

"Are you saying you tried to set me up with Corwin?"

Ter grinned. "Not exactly. Just that I thought you'd like him."

"You're sure you don't mind?"

"Mike, Jesus. I'm *thrilled*. I love him to death. But you can give him what he *needs*."

"I'm not sure what this is," I admitted. "What we're doing."

Terrence snorted. "We all said the same thing when we started living together—Jake and George and Dave and I. Hell, sometimes we still don't know. But it's fun, right? Whatever it is."

Yeah, it was fun.

Corwin really did seem to be making an effort to be politer, to help around the house. I hadn't spanked him since the night he'd shown me his scratches. I'd stuck him in the corner a couple of times when he needed to cool down. He'd hated it at first, but once he discovered that corner time ended the same way spankings did, with my arms around him, he put up less of a fight.

I surreptitiously checked his body each night for new marks, but I never saw anything. We hadn't fucked yet, just fooled around. We played with a pair of handcuffs Jake had lent us—I cuffed Corwin to the headboard and explored his body, teasing him until he was an incoherent, begging mess. He was

always eager enough when we exchanged blowjobs or made out, but I got the sense that what he really liked was falling asleep with me afterwards.

It was hard to overlook that loneliness, that vulnerability. The fact that he did have some growing up to do. And equally impossible to ignore the fact that I couldn't stay here forever. What would Corwin do when I was gone? Was it presumptuous to think that was even an issue for him? Maybe I was just supposed to be a summer fling.

But I worried about his future—about *him*. I hardly felt in a position to suggest he look for a job, yet I had a feeling he'd feel better once he was financially independent from his parents. And when he had something to occupy his time besides TF and sex.

Not that I was complaining.

We tried BDSM scenes a couple of times with the other guys, but for some reason, it didn't feel like it had when Ter and I had Topped together in Toledo. I'd never been self-conscious around Ter or other play partners before, but I was now. And I figured the reason was Corwin. I wanted him to myself. I bristled when Dave gave Corwin an order. If I tried to watch Ter use a flogger on Corwin, I wanted to yank it out of his hand and take over. Corwin caught on to this quickly and started using scenes with the others to tease me. I found it less funny than I probably should have.

The company I'd applied with e-mailed me to schedule a second interview—this one in person. Corwin coached me in some practice runs. I saw what he'd meant that first night when he said he could behave when he wanted to. He was so reassuring, so confident and enthusiastic when he coached me, that I lost my nervousness quickly. He was more than a needy brat, and it was nice to relax a little and let him take care of me.

And he was excited to learn the job was in Sequoia Heights, only fifteen minutes away.

“You can stay here now,” he said.

“Well, not here here,” I said.

He frowned. “Why not?”

“It’d get a little crowded if this was a permanent arrangement, don’t you think?”

He left shortly after that, and stayed gone several hours. Running off was still his favorite way to deal with situations he didn’t like. I resolved not to give him any special attention when he came home—didn’t want to encourage his behavior. But as soon as I heard his car pull up, I was out on the porch. I pulled him into my arms and kissed him hard.

“Sorry,” he murmured against my chest. “I don’t want you to go.”

“It’ll be all right,” I said vaguely, wishing I knew what to tell him. “I’m not going anywhere right now.”

Corwin seemed fine the rest of the evening, but there was something a little off about his behavior. At dinner he started making fun of the way George pronounced “eggs” and wouldn’t let up. George finally snapped that things had been a lot better around here before Corwin arrived, and Corwin had left the table so fast he’d overturned his chair.

That night I found two short but deep scratches on Corwin’s arm. “What’s this about?” I asked.

“Dunno.”

“What George said?”

He shifted, trying to pull his arm away. “I did it before that.”

I wondered if it was about me, then, and the job in Sequoia Heights. But I didn’t want to bring that up, because I didn’t know how to reassure him. If I left, I wasn’t sure what would happen between us, and I was afraid he’d want answers.

I pressed my lips gently to the scratched spot. “What did I tell you to do if you wanted to hurt yourself?”

“Tell you.” He lay still, staring at me. “But you’ve got the interview tomorrow. I didn’t want to upset you.”

“This does upset me,” I said.

“Sorry,” he said, but didn’t sound it.

I gave him a brief spanking, and then we curled up together. He was stiff and resisted being held at first, then softened as I kissed his jaw and throat. He reached down and stroked my cock while I sucked a bruise on his neck. I took his cock too, and we panted against each other’s lips, his soft whimpers colliding with mine. By the time we fell asleep, he seemed better.

The next morning I went in for the interview, and at the end of it, I was offered the job. The relief I felt outweighed any regret about having to give up my long, slow summer days at the farmhouse. There was a part of me that almost wished I didn’t have to go back to a desk job, that wished I’d used my period of unemployment to reinvent myself, to accept that I didn’t have control over everything and let myself free fall. I grinned and silently blamed Corwin for those thoughts.

I drove back to the house, eager to celebrate.

Except I was the only one there. Corwin’s car was in the drive, but he was nowhere to be found, not even the shed. I looked out the window and saw Monster sitting beside his doghouse. So Corwin wasn’t out walking him.

I called my parents to tell them the good news. Then I texted Corwin to ask where he was. A few minutes later I sent him another text letting him know I’d gotten the job. He didn’t respond.

Terrence came home from work early, and we opened a bottle of wine.

“Where’s Corwin?” he asked.

“Not sure. He’s not around, and I haven’t heard from him.”

By five, Jake, Dave, and George were home, and we were all worried. We’d searched the property several times, and Ter had called one of Corwin’s TF buddies in town. We’d all tried Corwin’s phone.

“He’ll come back.” George sounded a little nervous. “He always shows up eventually.”

“Where would he have gone without his car?” Ter asked. “There’s nothing around.”

I stood at the kitchen sink, trying not to let on how queasy I felt. If Corwin had gone and done something stupid just because he thought I was abandoning him... if he’d hurt himself, if he had run off for good...

“It’s a stunt,” I said. It had to be, because I didn’t want to think about the alternative. “He’s pissed at me because he thinks I’m leaving him.”

“So he’s what, hiding somewhere?” Terrence asked.

“Probably.”

I noticed Monster crouched by the entrance to his house, snuffling and wagging his tail. “Out there,” I said suddenly, and hurried out the back door.

I reached the doghouse and pushed Monster out of the way. He slobbered happily on me as I got on my hands and knees and peered inside the house. Corwin was curled up in there, his eyes shining in the darkness.

“What the hell are you doing?” I asked.

“Hey, Mike,” he said dully.

“Get out of there right now.”

I stepped back as he extricated himself from the doghouse and got unsteadily to his feet. “Are you all right?” I looked him over. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine. Just—”

“Good.” I took his wrist, tugged him forward, and swatted his ass. He hissed and winced but didn’t protest otherwise. “Then I’m going to whale the ever-loving tar out of you.”

Terrence had joined us. “Corwin? What’s going on?”

“Do you mind giving us a few minutes, Terrence?” I asked, forcing myself to be polite.

Terrence nodded. “You okay, Cor?”

Corwin didn’t answer.

“I’ll be inside.” Terrence headed back to the house.

I guided Corwin out of reach of Monster, who was trying to jump on both of us. “A day in the doghouse, huh?” I asked flatly.

“Figured at least Monster likes me all right.”

I swatted him again. “Quit feeling sorry for yourself. Tell me what this is really about.”

“Ow. All right, yeah. Honest to God, Mike, I do feel like people hate me most of the time. And I wanted to be out of everybody’s hair a while.”

I steered him over to the stone bench by the garden, pushed him down and sat beside him. I took his chin in my hand and made him look at me. “Hiding from us was not the right thing to do.”

“Whatever,” he said as I released him.

I pulled him awkwardly over my lap and delivered six hard smacks to the seat of his jeans.

“Ow! You can’t do this out here are you—ow—crazy?”

“Don’t you whatever me.” I helped him sit up. “Ter was worried about you. George was upset. Monster, I’m sure, missed his house.”

“You weren’t worried?”

“I suggested it might be a stunt.”

“You make me sound like such a jerk,” he mumbled.

“You were incredibly immature.”

He turned away. I could see his jaw trembling. “That’s what I hate about the world. Most of the people you pass on the street won’t give you the time of day. They’ll treat you like you don’t even matter. But if you try to escape somewhere and just be on your own, people get on your case.” He wiped his nose on the back of his hand.

“What were you escaping?”

He shrugged again. “Noise. Like I said, I feel like I’m on everyone’s nerves.”

I placed an arm around him, and he leaned gratefully into me. “Why do you think you get on people’s nerves?”

“Just the way I am. I push people. And I don’t do much of anything. Not like George, who knows how to do all these random things. Or Jake, who works, like, sixty hours a week. Or Ter or Dave who know how to make everyone feel better. I’m not like that. I don’t really have anything people want.”

“Now that is some first class self-pitying.”

He shot me a glare. “I do feel sorry for myself. It’s a feeling, same as being happy. You wouldn’t tell someone to quit being happy, would you? Or even sad. Because if they could quit feeling something they didn’t want to feel, they would.”

“I guess you’re right.”

He stretched and sort of smiled, rubbing his nose against my shoulder. “Woe is me.”

“Unless they get hooked on feeling that way.”

“Believe me, I wish I was normal.”

“I think you’re perfectly normal.”

He rolled his head in my direction and fixed me with a skeptical look.

“You don’t need to do anything special to impress people,” I said. “There’s a lot to like in you.”

He glanced at his hands. “Sometimes I think so too.”

“Good.”

“Not today, though.”

I put a hand between his shoulder blades and scrubbed his back briefly. “Is this about me getting the job?”



“Yeah. Partly. I’m so happy for you, you have to believe that. I just can’t stand how everyone leaves. How you came here, and now it’s just like... And Terrence... Is it so stupid of me to want just one person who’s *mine*?”

“No,” I said quietly. “It’s not stupid.”

We were silent a while.

“Is it stupid I want you to be that person?”

I sighed. “No. We’ll work it out, Corwin. I’m not walking out on you, okay?” I stood and offered my hand. “Why don’t you come inside and eat something?”

“Is Ter pissed?”

“Ter’ll be fine once you talk to him.”

“Are you gonna...?”

“We’ll figure it out inside.”

\*\*\*\*

I supervised Corwin through supper and snagged an egg timer from the windowsill while he was washing his dishes.

I told him he had six minutes to shower, dress, and be standing in front of me.

He looked at me a little desperately, like he wanted to argue.

“The timer starts now.” I set the timer for six minutes. It ticked steadily.

Corwin hurried to the bathroom.

I was sitting at the table when he emerged, damp but dressed. He stood in front of me. I saw the outline of an erection through his pants. He didn’t say anything, and we waited for the last thirty seconds to tick by on the timer. He jumped when it dinged.

“Study,” I said, leading the way.

Terrence was already there, sitting right where he had the first night he and Corwin and I had gathered here to talk about DD. Corwin balked a little when

he saw him, but followed me inside. “Corner,” I said. He hesitated, and I patted his ass to get him moving. He stood in the far corner with his hands laced behind his head, nose to the wall.

After a moment, I looked at Terrence and nodded.

Ter cleared his throat. “Corwin?”

Corwin tensed when Terrence said his name. “Yes, Sir?”

“Come here, please.”

Corwin went to Terrence, but glanced at me.

Terrence snapped his fingers. “Look at me.”

Corwin’s gaze dropped to the floor. Terrence caught his chin and tilted his face up.

“You scared me,” he said simply. He held Corwin’s jaw for a long time, forcing Corwin to look at him. “I didn’t know where you were, and that worried me.”

“Why?” Corwin asked bitterly. “Why do you care what happens to me? You didn’t even want me.”

Terrence shook him. “Enough of that. You know we love you. All of us, including Mike. That’s why we were worried.”

Corwin swallowed. “I was just in the backyard.”

“Hiding from us.” Even I cringed a little at Terrence’s tone. He might not have a scary voice, but he did disappointed better than anyone I’d ever met.

“I like being alone sometimes,” Corwin said. “You never mind when I leave for a few hours. And for all you know, when I’m gone I’m doing way worse stuff than lying in a doghouse.”

He had a point. And I was glad that he’d stayed close. Maybe it was an escape, as he’d said, from whatever feelings were overwhelming him. But he could have run, could have tried to avoid Ter and me completely. Instead he’d asked for help in the only way he knew how.

Terrence wasn't impressed. "You know exactly what you did," he said. "And I am really, really disappointed in you."

Corwin ducked his head. Terrence planted a rough kiss on it.

"Try anything like that again, and I'll be the one blistering your ass. But for now, you can answer to Mike."

Terrence stood, gave me a brief nod, and left the study.

Corwin turned to me. He looked uncertain and a little disoriented.

I ordered him back to the corner. He went. I listened to him gradually regain control of his breathing.

I wanted to go to him. Wanted to stand behind him and hear his breath come faster. I wanted to brush my lips over the back of his neck, then order him to turn around and kiss me. Run my hands down his back and over his ass and pull him against my body. I wanted to let him know I wasn't going anywhere, that he meant too much to me, that I might be the one who got to spank him, but he was the one who knew how to undo me.

But I had to finish this.

"Turn around," I said.

He did, keeping his hands behind his head. His eyes met mine.

"We're going to the shed," I told him, and walked out of the room without waiting to see if he followed.

Monster bounded to the end of his chain as we walked through the yard. I was almost to the shed when I looked back and saw Corwin crouched on the grass, hugging Monster.

I walked over to them, and Corwin buried his face in the dog's shaggy coat. I took him by the ear and pulled him to his feet. "Shed," I said, tugging him the rest of the way. He gave a small whimper but came with me. I ushered him in and shut the door, then pulled the chain to turn the single light on.

It was quiet in here, and smelled faintly of gas from the riding mower.

"Ter was awful," Corwin said, rubbing his ear. "I feel horrible now."

“He was right.”

“It’s not fair,” he added. “You acted like you weren’t pissed after it happened. You were nice to me. And now you hate me.”

“Knock it off.” My words echoed in the small space. “You don’t try to manipulate me to get out of a punishment. That won’t ever work. If you’re confused, we can talk. If you’re scared, we can wait. But *do not play me.*”

He gave a quick nod and looked down.

“Do you know why you’re being punished?”

“I was a brat.”

“What did you do?”

“Hid from all of you.”

“Why was that wrong?”

“It scared you,” he said.

“It did,” I confirmed. “It scared me a lot.”

He exhaled slowly.

“You’re a special person,” I said. “And I care about you a lot. I couldn’t stand to think about you in danger. Or running out on me. I thought you cared about me too, at least a little bit.”

“I do,” Corwin said, jerking his head up. I could see he was blinking back tears. “I wasn’t trying to...”

“I get that you stayed close,” I said. “I get that you didn’t run. Believe me, I appreciate that.”

“You’re the one who’s trying to leave!” he said.

“And you thought you’d punish me for that?”

“No.” He shook his head furiously. “You don’t *get* it.”

“You wanted to know I’d find you.”

He looked stunned. Then he nodded, relieved. "I... I just wanted to know you'd *look* for me."

"I did. And I always will. But I think the next step is that you *talk* to me when you're upset. Even if it's just to tell me you want to be alone for a while. Okay?"

He scrubbed his eyes with the heel of his hand. "Okay. Yeah. I'm sorry I got you worried."

*But you're a little bit glad, too, aren't you?*

"Don't ever do that to me again," I said quietly. I undid my belt and pulled it through my loops. He tensed at the sound.

"Mike?"

"Bend over. Hands against the wall."

"No," he said uncertainly.

"Right now. Or I'll add another dozen licks to your count."

He bent at the waist and braced against the wall, shifting a little as I stepped behind him. "Two dozen," I said.

He didn't respond.

I doubled my belt in my right hand, making sure the buckle was tucked against my palm. I brought the folded leather across the seat of his pants four times in rapid succession, producing four crisp, rhythmic *cracks*. I moved an inch lower and delivered four more. He sucked in a breath.

"Straighten up," I said. "Grab the beam above your head."

He obeyed. I reached around him and undid his pants, pulling them to his knees. His legs were muscular and pale except for the skin at the edges of his briefs, which was tinged pink. His shirt rode up, exposing his narrow midsection.

"Relax," I reminded him.

I saw him try, but he clenched again as soon as my belt struck. I spaced these blows farther apart. He tried to push his hips forward and tuck his ass in, but I reached around and adjusted him. After four licks, I stopped and rubbed the hot skin. Then I cracked him four more times on the underside of his ass.

He clung to the beam, panting, as I yanked his briefs down.

“Don’t,” he whispered.

“What was that?” I asked.

He shook his head, eyes closed.

“Are you telling me how to conduct this punishment?”

“No, Sir.”

“I can add another dozen.”

“I’m sorry.”

I propped one foot on the bottom rung of the wooden stool by the workbench. “Over my knee,” I said.

He shuffled over to me, his cock flaccid, face flushed, ass an angry red all over. He bent over my raised leg. I wrapped my left arm over his shoulders and swung the belt with my right.

He yelped as it connected with his bare, flushed skin.

Then he was quiet except for a few close-mouthed whimpers as I delivered seven more strokes, traveling down his buttocks and to his thighs. His stomach muscles tensed against my leg, and he clutched me, body trembling as I delivered the final sharp crack.

He didn’t move. I lowered my leg slowly, keeping my arm around him to support him.

The skin was welted in a few places, and I ran my palm over the roughness of it. He clenched, panting.

“We’re all done,” I said softly.

He staggered away from me, nearly tripping over his pants. He went behind the wall of the L-shaped stall.

I left my belt on the stool, went in, and stretched out next to him on the straw. I drew him close to me. He didn't make a sound except for one choked sob.

"Easy," I said, stroking his hair back from his face. "Let it out."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Over and forgiven."

He resisted only a second when I put my arms around him, then he curled against me and lay quietly for several minutes.

"Better?" I asked finally.

He shook his head.

"Why not?"

He hesitated. "I don't want you to leave me. I want to go with you, wherever you're going."

"I'd like that," I said.

He started. "You would?"

"Yes." I traced his lips with my fingertip, then leaned forward and kissed him. It really was that simple, I thought. I wanted him with me. And there were ways we could make that happen. "I'll probably sublet a place for a while until I'm sure the job's gonna work out. You're welcome to split rent with me."

He grinned and socked me in the arm. "Mike. Are you serious? We can do this?"

"We can do this," I confirmed. He clambered onto me, but I put a hand on his chest before he could kiss me. "We're both gonna work though, okay? If you decide you want to go to school, and your parents want to help you out with that, fine. Otherwise, you need a job."

“Bossy,” he muttered.

“I know.”

He leaned down and kissed me hard. “I want to do more of this,” he said when we parted. “A lot more of this.”

I kissed his jaw, biting lightly around the bone.

“We will,” I promised. I pushed my hands under his shirt and rubbed from his belly to his chest, circling his nipples with my thumbs. He sighed and closed his eyes. I rolled him off me and pressed him back into the straw, then teased his lips open with my tongue. I sucked his lower lip while I continued to play with his nipples, pinching and tugging on the hard nubs until he arched his back and whimpered.

“Show me,” I whispered. “Show me how much you want it.”

He wrapped his legs around my waist and pressed his hips against mine. Rubbed his cock against the front of my jeans, then fumbled with my fly. I helped him out, yanking my pants down.

“Will you fuck me?” he asked. “I want you to show me how much *you* want it.”

“Oh.” I grinned. “I would. But no condom.”

He produced one from his jeans.

“Were you planning this?” I asked.

“I live with four guys. I keep ’em on me.”

I rolled the condom on, breathing onto his cock as I did, making his balls tighten. The condom was pre-lubed, but I added some spit.

He groaned as I entered him. He was tight, maybe a little nervous. I kissed him as I slid all the way in. He kept his legs around me and I took him in long, smooth strokes. He whimpered with each one. At first I thought I was hurting him, but when I tried to slow down, he pulled me closer and urged me to go faster. He came suddenly, shooting onto my chest.

“Yes,” I whispered. “So good.”



He arched and wriggled, still panting. “Keep fucking me,” he begged.

“Don’t worry.”

I sped up my thrusts and came a minute later.

I held him afterward. The floor of the shed was too uncomfortable for me to sleep on, but he drifted off after a few minutes.

I liked listening to his slow breathing, his soft snores, and knowing he was mine for keeps.

**THE END**

## **Author Bio**

*J.A. Rock was recently released from Alabama and has been set loose on the world. She is currently in South America with her partner in inadvertent crime, SB, and will spend the latter part of the year farming in New Zealand. She writes LGBTQ romance and is the author of By His Rules, Wacky Wednesday, Calling The Show, The Brat-tastic Jayk Parker, and, with Lisa Henry, The Good Boy and The Naughty Boy.*

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