

# Teaching Her A Lesson

## Part Fourteen: Sub Plans

During the summer months, it was easy for a single teacher's house to transition from a comforting retreat into a self-imposed prison. On the weekends, I still got out to see my friends, and otherwise there was the occasional errand to run, but as time passed, time increasingly lost meaning. Grocery shopping was as likely to happen at 3 AM as it was during daylight hours. It was liberating, in a sense, but simultaneously disorienting. One year I had managed to land a summer school position to help keep me grounded, but the others, I had needed to adapt on my own.

One of those adaptations had been Baxton Park. It was a decently sized public park, mostly a softball field and open grass but with a few pavilions and a wooded area at the east end. Squirrels and birds were in abundance, along with the occasional sighting of a raccoon or a hawk. One day, simply to be out of the house for a while, I took my lunch there and ate it sitting on a small grassy hill overlooking the field, leaning back against a perfectly angled tree trunk. It soon got so that I ate lunch there almost every day of the summer, and took my dinner there on occasion, too. It was an excuse to get out of the house, to be outdoors, to see people without having to interact with them. The park was a refuge from my home and the lesson planning and updating materials and renewing certification criteria and my oh so empty bed.

That last was in times during which I was single, which was more often than not. I'd always imagined I'd be married by now, settled down and starting a family of my own. It was hard to start dating when you worked eighty hours a week with next to no disposable income, much less find somebody to settle down and have a kid with. So instead I came here, where I could see other people's kids, then go back home and get back to prepping for the fall. It was balance. At the park, I could simply exist, let my mind wander and drift along without plan or purpose. It became a place where I did a lot of my most uninhibited thinking.

That night, it was where I did my scheming.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when I parallel parked along the street by Baxton Park, hand throbbing, mind ablaze with outrage. The latter was directed as much at myself as at Isa and Candy. How could I have been so careless? I had disarmed myself, been seduced with pathetic ease. By a pair of lesbians, no less! To think, it had been easier for me to believe that Candy wanted to play sex games with one of her athletes, that Isa was getting off flashing her admittedly spectacular tits, than to even wonder if they might be up to something. Hubris of the highest order.

I snatched the blanket I kept in my trunk for just such occasions and made my way up into the stands around the softball field, settling into the back row by the scoreboard. The night chill was more pronounced up here even this small distance off the ground, but previous late-night wanderings had taught me that on occasion, the police swung by the park, probably on the lookout for mischievous youths. My perch, however, was shielded from scrutiny thanks to the scoreboards blocking sight of me from the street.

I nestled in, leaning my head back against the wooden planks. It was a clear night. The stars were out in abundance. Somehow, that helped calm me down. There would be time later to kick myself for lack of foresight (a polite term for thinking entirely with my dick). For now, I had to start acting my intellect and get to work on next steps.

I needed the Serenex back. Whatever else I did, it had to start with that. What I'd do about my malefactors was secondary. Acquiring that precious white canister was the only goal. Not having much experience with the sort of tactical thinking required for such operations, I instead approached it like a learning objective. Ergo, first things first: outline barriers.

That was not a short list, unfortunately. They had the Serenex. That damnable taser. Isa's police training. They were intelligent. Whether or not their suspicions had been allayed, I had to assume they weren't stupid enough to be as complacent as I'd been. Ergo, they would be wary of me. The odds that the canister would be left somewhere I might easily burgle were low. They quite possibly had a gun safe for Isa's sidearm, which could well accommodate the Serenex as well. Not a certainty, but a good enough chance to rule out the approach. I'd kept it sealed in my briefcase, after all, and would surely have preferred a safe if I owned one. Besides, I hadn't had half as much cause to worry someone might try to come along and take it.

The problem looming largest, however, was my timeline. Tonight, I expected they were busy celebrating, or maybe sleeping off the wine I'd gifted them. Soon, however, they would set their self-righteous minds to "liberating" the young women from our arrangement – Megan, too, I expected. There wouldn't be an easy way to do that tomorrow, since Sundays meant conspicuous house calls and having to deduce the girls' whereabouts. Come Monday, however, Officer Barbour could easily call them to her office and dose them one by one. My theory about how conflicting inputs might interact under the influence of Serenex was just that, a theory. It could easily be that a new command would overwrite an old one. Even if it fucked their heads up in some unforeseeable way, Isa might consider that a risk worth taking. To their minds, the girls' heads already *were* fucked up, after all.

There was no waiting. In all probability, the Serenex would leave with Isa for work Monday morning, at which point I was officially screwed. Even if they continued to

maintain our secret, they would take away everything I'd gained and then destroy the rest of the canister's contents. Whatever I did, it had been soon.

An owl landed nearby atop the chain link fence separating the benches from the field. It hooted softly. I nodded a greeting to it. It went unacknowledged.

Next step: what assets did I have? A shorter list to be sure, but not nothing. First and foremost, I had the girls. To various degrees, at least. Each had their shortcomings as allies. Abbie had her tendency toward overzealousness. Taylor's dedication was suspect. Cassie was... well, Cassie. None of them were exactly covert ops material. They were, however, each invested in the new status quo in their own way. I had no doubt they would each take issue with Candy and Isa's characterization of our affiliation.

As for other assets? Beyond the three of them, there wasn't much. The element of surprise was a maybe; Isa had been awfully suspicious right up to the end. Did desperation count?

As the owl and I took our time sussing out our respective problems, I considered that there was still one thing I had going for me. I simply needed to identify a means of exploiting it.

Time to rally the troops. If there was one thing I could count on to at least cheer me up, it was Abbie, Taylor and Cassie. Now I only had to hope I could count on them for a little bit more.

*Come on, come on, pick up pick up pick up!*

“Hello?”

“Candace! Oh thank—”

“What in the name of all that’s unholy are you calling me for at this hour, Canon?”

“Look, I know it’s late, I’m sorry, but—”

“Late? Christ, it’s after two! You have some nerve.”

“I really am sorry, I swear. Now just shut up and listen to me – there isn’t much—”

“Did you tell me to shut up? Don’t you *dare* tell me what to do, buster! After what you pulled, you’re lucky you aren’t on your way to prison. Believe me, if we could have found a way, you would be.”

“Yes, you made that very clear earlier, and I didn’t mean to be rude, but please if you’ll hear me out for just a—”

“Great, now you woke Isa.” Her voice through the phone was suddenly muffled.

“No, mama, it’s that asshole again... I *did* have it on vibrate, but he must have called a hundred times... We can’t tell him to go fuck himself, because he might actually try to do it... I know you meant it metaphorically—”

“Figuratively,” I mumbled.

“ –but maybe you should go back to bed and let me handle this, OK?” The phone returned to her mouth and she was addressing me again. “Now you pissed off Isa. She’s come up with some very creative yet safe-and-free ways to occupy your time, you know that? You’re lucky I told her to go back to sleep.”

“Don’t!”

Finally, she took a breath. “What do you mean, don’t?”

“Thank you,” I shot, sarcasm heavy. “Are the girls there? I don’t hear them, but... are they?”

“The girls? Who, you mean Cassie and the Sterns?”

“No, the fucking Spice Girls. Yes, those girls!”

“Watch your tone, Canon.”

“Sorry.” It wasn’t easy, feigning deference with my heart pounding this fast.

“But... you should know, I think they might be, um, on their way to your house. Shit, I’m a little surprised they aren’t there now. Must’ve stopped somewhere.”

“On their way here? Why in god’s name would they be on their way here at this hour? What the hell did you do?” She spoke aside again. “No, mama, he said... look, I got this. Now shh.”

“I didn’t do anything! Or I didn’t mean to anyway. They were waiting up for me – a sleepover next door – and... well, long story short, they figured out something was off,

and I figured, you know, rip off the bandaid or whatever, get it over with. So I told them. Everything.”

“OK, and...?”

“And, they flipped out, just like I told you they would! I know you think I’m some evil mastermind, but you have to believe me, Abbie is the one pulling the strings. I thought maybe you were right, that she’d be happy to be released, but she went freaking ballistic!”

“Define ‘ballistic.’”

“Well I didn’t get locked in a trunk, quite, but I may as well have been! She and Taylor wrestled me down and tied me to my own goddamn bed!”

“Look at you, managing to have some kinky fun after all. Don’t you worry, Canon. We’ll take care of everything soon.”

“Well I hope you’re ready, because the way she was talking, they’re on their way over there *now*. *Tonight*. Do you hear me?! They took my car, and any minute now, they could be kicking in your door and... fuck fuck fuck! Are you hearing me? The Sterns, they’re not exactly what you might call ‘restrained,’ understand? You and Isa could be in serious danger!”

This time it was harder to hear them; Candy must have set the phone down. I ran through the math. The girls had left my place about twenty minutes ago. Ten minutes to Candy and Isa’s place. How much longer if they stopped at the Stern’s? Maybe their workout clothes and bikinis had been deemed a poor choice for clandestine activities? Or shit, maybe they really were getting a weapon! That had been the first place both Sterns girls’ minds had gone the moment I’d tried to explain the situation. I’d begged her not to, but Abbie really was insane. Her reality had realigned around being my fantasy slut; finding out Candy had tried to oust her from that throne had been tantamount to an assault on her innermost sense of self. Taylor might be marginally less affronted, but she’d been nursing a grudge over Isa’s casual taser abuse all week, and this was the excuse she’d been waiting for to exact her justice, as she saw it.

There seemed to be a lot of that going around.

“Why are you warning us?” Isa’s voice? Yes, a little deeper. More guarded, less flippant.

“Look, say whatever you want about the shit I’ve done, but... I don’t want anything to happen to those girls. Or you two, frankly. Abbie locked Taylor in the trunk of her car only last week, remember! If I hadn’t talked her down, I think she might have been seriously about to do something drastic to her. I don’t know what she’s capable of. Plus I know you’re so damn trigger happy with that stun gun of yours, which is a whole other risk factor.”

“It’s a taser, not a stun gun. Tasers don’t have to be close. I just don’t like to miss.”

“Yeah, well, I googled that crap, Hawkeye. You can really hurt someone with that, you know? People have *died*! And I can’t get that image out of my head, that shit-eating grin on your face – no offense – when you zapped Taylor. And I’ve made a mess enough out of things without being an accessory to giving an eighteen-year-old kid a fucking heart attack when you lose your cool and fire a few thousand volts into her!”

It was quiet again. Before I got a response, the call terminated.

Shit. Shit! I called back, but nobody answered. Same with Isa’s phone. Were the girls there now? It seemed so improbable that a police officer slept with her doors unlocked, but anybody could get sloppy about a window. I forgot to lock the door between my garage and the back yard all the time.

If I hadn’t, Abbie might never have gotten the drop on me last weekend, and I’d be at home in bed right now, sleeping easy. But I’d never have landed myself in a locker room orgy either.

I paced. Back and forth, back and forth. I called again. No answer. More pacing. Should I try the girls again? They could still be in serious danger. Isa might be Officer Barbie to them, but all one had to do was open a news site and there was a story of a cop using excessive force against some unlucky kid. None of the commands I’d given Isa would do a damn thing to keep her from hurting those poor kids. None of the commands I’d given those kids would keep them from doing anything horrible to Candy and Isa.

I called again. No answer. Six calls later, dizzy from about-facing, someone finally picked up. “Stop calling, Canon!” Candy yelled.

I froze. I was supposed to obey her commands. Though technically, she hadn’t ordered me to hang up. “Are they there? Is everyone OK? You have to give me something, Candace. I’m losing my mind over here! If somebody gets hurt, or... or...” It was too dreadful to put in words.

There was a ghost of sympathy in her voice. “Take a breath, all right? No, they’re not here. Isa’s went ahead and unlocked the doors so they don’t do anything stupid and smash in a window or something. Hopefully they’ll–”

The phone left her mouth, and I could just make out her voice addressing her girlfriend. “No, it’s him again. I know. I told him not to call. Yes, I know he could be... look, I am not an idiot, all right?”

Smart of her to be suspicious of foul play. Would that I’d been that alert. It had been half an hour now. Where the hell were those girls? Had Cassie talked them down? Or were they duct taping her mouth shut and gearing up for war?

Candy returned. “We’re handling this. You stay wherever the fuck you are, hear me? So help me, if you already found a way to slither out of this, I won’t be able to rein Isa in next time. I don’t think I’d even try.”

“Paranoid much? God, Candace, I... ya know, fine. I won’t call again, but keep me in the loop, OK? I’m halfway to shitting myself over this. Promise me you’ll tell me once everything is under control.”

“We’re going to get them back under their *own* control, Canon. Don’t you worry.”

“I don’t care about any of that any more. I just don’t want anyone to... crap, I’m repeating myself. Let me know? And... you know. You two be careful too.”

“Yeah.”

The phone went dead.

Minutes passed like hours.

Candy had said don’t call, but she hadn’t said don’t text. I could still do that without letting her know her plan had failed as badly as mine.

*I know you said not to call, but... anything yet?*

*Don’t be a little bitch. Candace is seeing if they’re parked on the street. Might be lurking, she said, freaked by the lights on. Chill tfo*

I had texted Candy, but it wasn’t surprising that Isa answered. Anticipated, really. She’d be an idiot not to be wary of me. I texted back a quick thanks to keep the line of communication open, and went back to waiting.

What felt like a thousand years later, my phone rang again.

“Heya, Mr. Canon. It’s Cassie.”

“I know. I have caller ID. What the heck is going on?”

“Taylor and Abbie went home to get changed. All black and stuff. I’m not sure how much it helps. I could see them really easily. But the street light is on and it’s really bright over there.”

“The light’s are on? At Ms. Salata’s house? Is that where you are?”

“Yeah. I was getting really scared so they told me to wait in the car, like a getaway driver in a heist movie or something I guess. I tried to tell them it was a bad idea, but they didn’t want to listen. It is, though. Honestly, I’m not a very good driver. I just learned two weeks ago that blinking red means stop, not slow. I always wondered why people got so honky at them.” She paused, for once realizing how far off topic she’d wandered. “Is this a really bad idea? The lights are on! I think they’re awake! I have the window down so I can listen for gunshots or screams or, I don’t even know. I’m so scared, Mr. Canon. I don’t like this.”

“It’s going to be all right, Cassie.”

“You say that, but... Abbie has a bat, and Taylor had her hand in her hoodie pocket like she was holding something, and... I’m really worried. They’re *so* mad, Mr. Canon. I mean, I’m not happy about what they did to you either, but they’re *really* mad.”

“Me too. And I’m proud of you for keeping an eye on them. You’re being a good friend, and right now they need good friends more than ever. I’ve had some time to think, and I have a plan.”

“Thank gosh.”

“Cassie? Taylor and Abbie are in trouble, and I need you to help them, all right?”

“All right. But... how?”

“That’s my girl. Are they in the house now?”

“I don’t know. They went around to the back yard, I think. They were actually pretty tough to see once they got out from under the streetlamp. Do you think they’ve done this kind of thing before? Because they seemed to really know what to do.”

I disregarded the question. “Look, I need you to go inside. OK? Nice and slowly, just go inside and see what’s going on. Right through the front door, because you don’t mean anyone any harm. Nice and slow, no sudden movements.”

“I dunno... you’re making this sound really scary...”

“It’s Ms. Salata. You know her. Do you really think she’d let anything bad happen to you?”

“She let something bad happen to you!” she pointed out.

“Well she likes you a lot better than she likes me, I promise. Now please, Cassie. It...” I winced at my manipulation even as I said it anyway. “It would give me a lot of pleasure if you went in there.”

“It... it would?”

“Yes.”

“Oh. I never thought you’d want me to... Oh boy. Ham and crackers, this is scary.”

“You can do this. You’re kind, and you’re smart, and you’re going to help everyone stay calm. All right?”

“I feel like you’re just saying that to get me to go in there.”

How honest of her. “I’ll say it again later when I don’t want anything, all right? We can assess my integrity in the morning. But there’s one more thing, hon. I want you to leave the phone on in your pocket, OK? We’ll stop talking, but don’t hang up. I want to hear what’s happening. But you can’t let them know about it. They’re really mad at me, remember? Just tuck it in your pocket, and make sure the light isn’t showing.”

“If... if you’re sure. I guess I could do that. I’m so freaking nervous right now, my gosh. My mom would *kill* me if she knew I was doing this.”

“She’d kill you if she found out I told you to do it and you didn’t.”

“Yeah, probably. All right. Here I go.” A pause. Some noise. A seatbelt? “OK. Going now.” Another pause. “K, actually going now.” And then it stayed quiet.

I minimized the phone conversation and brought up my messages, texting Candy again. *Are they there? Any word?*

I heard faint noises from the speaker. It was muffled, but once I cranked up the volume, I could hear it well enough. *Oh please don’t let me hear a taser being fired. Or a gun.* I braced myself, heart hammering. What in the hell had I set into motion?

“Cassie?”



“Hi Officer Barbour.”

“Glad you could join us.”

The phone buzzed. *Y* was all it said. It must be tense if I was only getting one letter.

“So now everybody’s here. Why don’t we all take a seat, ladies. Talk this out like reasonable people?” Isa was saying with steely calm.

“Take a seat? Take a fucking bat upside the head is more like it, you nosy old cunt,” Abbie answered. She was louder. Closer to Cassie, or just... louder? The picture of it began to assemble in my mind.

“I understand you’re upset. You’ve been through a lot, and things have been done to you. I know you’re under a lot of stress, and I – we, both of us – are willing to hear what you have to say. But we can’t talk if we’re brandishing weapons at one another.”

“Big talk from the bitch with the stun gun.” Taylor, that time.

“It’s a taser. That means it can hit you from across the room. Which I very much don’t want to—”

“Barbie, I so much as see your fuckin’ finger twitch, and you better hope it’s some magic-ass fuckin’ taser gonna bounce around the room and take down all three of us. ‘Cause otherwise, you and your lil’ chica gonna be redecorating them mothafuckin’ walls, hear?” Abbie.

*Tell them I said to calm down and talk it out!*

*Show them your phone*

*Let them know it’s me telling them*

*They’ll listen to me!*

I typed feverishly, praying their tempers held back for a few more seconds. Normally I was more one to type in paragraphs than rapid fire through sentences, but time was of the essence. Isa and the Sterns were talking over one another, chest-thumping machismo slowly eroding attempts at peace talks. To my relief, I heard Candy’s voice.

“Look, I’m texting Mr. Canon right now!” she announced. It got quiet. Good, the girls were listening. “Here, I’ll show you. I don’t have a weapon, so just... yeah. See? He wants you to calm down and talk with us.”

Abbie answered. “Say we do. What you bitches wanna talk about? Seems like you already been done said plenty tonight.”

I heaved a sigh of relief. It had worked. They were calming down. Still pissed, but it was ramping down now, not up.

*Thx*, texted Candy as Isa’s voice started talking at the girls.

“I know you might not believe this, but you’re victims in all this. Whatever you’ve done, it’s not your fault, and we only want to help you get back to your normal lives. That’s all we were trying to do tonight, was to protect you.”

“Protect us? From what, good sex? Want us to lez up like y’all?”

“You know perfectly well what I meant. C’mon, if we’re going to talk, let’s talk, not try to score points for sick burns.”

“Burns? You the one with the taser.”

“See, that’s what I meant, actually, is... look, forget it. I’m putting it away. I’d appreciate it if you did the same.”

“Oh I know what you appreciate, Bull-Dyke Barbie.”

With the situation deescalating, I finally relaxed enough to let myself roll my eyes at Abbie’s attempt at ghetto ire. I wondered if she’d picked it up on TV, or from music. It sure as hell wasn’t from the mean streets of 80% white suburbia.

At any rate, I was texting Candy again. *It worked? You guys are talking?*

“You know, one of these days, you’re going to grow up a little and realize that the only person your homophobia is hurting is yourself. All you’re doing is forcing people out of your life that you might otherwise like.”

The eye roll redirected to Isa. Seriously? Like lashing out at LGBTQ people only hurt the bullies doing so? Good grief. I’d seen her talk students down in school more than once before. Hell, she’d been the one to pacify Taylor over the whole chapstick incident! Oh, well. It was two in the morning, and she had two armed and malicious students in her home. I supposed it was reasonable she wasn’t at her best.

Abbie and Taylor continued to banter with Isa. Meanwhile, my phone notified me Candy was typing, and a few moments later, I got a response.

*I think it’s working. Fuck. Abbie brought a bat. Taylor a knife as big as my arm! They set them down now. Tasey Mae is back in her holster too.*

Tasey Mae? Good god, they’d given it a nickname?

Isa resumed her efforts to get to the heart of the matter. “Look, nobody is judging you for anything that’s happened these past couple weeks. I checked this stuff out with the help of professionals, and you wouldn’t believe what’s in it.”

*(This stuff, she’d said. Not Serenex, not that stuff. This stuff. It was there. But she was still talking, and it remained of interest.)*

“It’s a Serenex base, yes, but our best guess is that it’s some kind of souped up party cocktail. Enough drugs and chemical shit in there to make you see your past lives. Now I haven’t found anything about a cure – not yet – but I want you to know, Mr. Canon was messing around with some really potent junk. That Serenex melted your brains, got you confused. But I want to make sure you know that nothing that happened is your fault.”

“Drugs? Like, what kind of drugs?” This time it was Cassie’s voice, the first time she’d spoken up since walking in the door. Her voice came through much more clearly.

“Don’t worry about it. What’s important is what we do next. I know you came over here because you think you have to protect your so-called relationship with Mr.

Canon. I appreciate that. As you all know, he got to me and messed with my head, too. Same with Ms. Salata. But while those feelings are strong, it is possible to think your way through them a bit.”

???? I sent to Candy. No sense letting her think I'd lost interest. Lest I be dismissed as a pest, I added, *How else can I help???* My excess of punctuation pained me, but I was hyped up bigtime, and it did convey some of my earnestness.

“Think our way through them?” Taylor asked. “The fuck does that mean?”

“It means... look. Mr. Canon dosed me with that shit.” *That shit*, now. Had it moved? “He told me I had to keep him safe and protect his freedom. Now the drug has made me do that, forced me to cover for all the crap he's pulled. But he can be safe, and I can keep him free from all the punishments he deserves, while still making sure he can't hurt you any more. You see? There's loopholes we can use to get back to normal.”

“But... what if we don't want to use loopholes?” Cassie asked timidly. Bless her heart.

*Isa's talking them down. It's good. I'll let you know.*

“Yeah,” Abbie joined in. “What if we're happy with the ways things are now? I'm still me. ‘Me’ just changed. People are supposed to change, right, my sweet little Candy dish? Y'all ain't the first teachers I seen peepin' this ass. People want what they want. I used to think fuckin' a teacher would be gross as hell, but shit, I gotta kinda recommend it now I tried it. Just 'cause your Mr. Rogers ass got hang-ups don't make it wrong.”

Isa wasn't ceding control of the conversation to Candy, though. Small wonder, control freak that she was showing herself to be. “That's fair. But you liked who you were before too, right?”

*Thanks. I'm so relieved.* I listened for a moment before sending.

“Yeah. I mean, I guess. Seems kinda boring now, really.”

“The rest of you feel the same way? Cassie? Taylor?”

Cassie was easily intelligible. I imagined the phone tucked in her bra, or a breast pocket. “I mean... I *think* I'm happy. But maybe you're right. Maybe it's just that stuff making me feel that way?”

“I... I don't know,” came a muffled voice. I could barely hear it. It had to be Taylor.

I finished my message. *Tell them I want them to let you dose them. That I think it's for the best. Or you can call, I can tell them. Whatever you think is best.*

It showed as read immediately. She was keeping the window open now.

Isa's voice spoke softly, full of compassion. “That can be hard to admit, Taylor. Nothing scarier in life than not knowing what to do.”

Cassie helpfully pointed out, “No way, all those weapons you guys had out were *way* scarier. You guys are all nuts.” I had to bite my arm to stifle a giggle. Even just knowing I was listening in, there was that full steam honesty of hers.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right, Ms. Brown. But you know what I mean, right? You should know that Ms. Salata and I talked, and we were thinking that maybe what would be best is to give you ladies another dose. Now before you panic on us, hear me out. We know, it’s scary, but you’ll have everyone else here to keep an eye on things, make sure nothing else bad happens. We’ll try to get you back to the way you were before. Then, if you decide you liked this way better, you can make that call with a clear mind. It can be *your* choice, not his. How does that sound?”

“Mr. Canon says it’s what he wants,” Candy chimed in. Excellent.

There was another pause, murmurs I couldn’t make out. I assumed that was her once again showing around my text. Poor girls had to be confused as hell, considering what I’d told them. Going from “they tried to dose me, the bastards” to “let them dose you, please” was a hard turn.

“I... I guess, if he says so?” Cassie mused. “As long as they can stay and watch and make sure you don’t, ya know, do anything weird. My head’s gone swiss-cheesy enough already.”

Ah, the irony. It had been Abbie who’d sliced and diced her brain to begin with. I’d never had the heart to tell her.

I typed another message to Candy and promptly hit send, my ear pressed to the phone. The next moments would be decisive.

“Do her first. Then... we’ll see.” Taylor’s tone was guarded. Anxious. “If it goes all right, then... sure. I’ll go next.”

My jaw dropped in outrage. “Really, Taylor?! You, too?!”

“What the hell was that!” Isa snapped suddenly. I clamped my mouth shut, but it was too late. Her voice grew louder, and quickly. “Was that... is one of you...?”

Sounds of friction issued from my phone. Their nature was quickly confirmed when I heard Isa’s voice speaking directly into Cassie’s receiver. “Canon, you son of a bitch. Eavesdropping on us? I don’t know what you think you’re up to. Did you put them up to this somehow? I don’t know what your game is, but when we’re done with them, we’re coming for you. You stay right there, wherever you are. I’ll find you. I knew you were gonna try something, but I didn’t think you’d be this slop– *Ptthhhhhh!* What the fuck, Candy?! Was that...?! Did... did you? Why would you...?”

Isa trailed off. Over the sound of Abbie and Taylor cheering, I just made out Candy’s voice. “I’m sorry, mama. It was part of the plan.”

*What next?* she texted back at me.

*Your turn.*

I walked in the front door in time to see Cassie putting her phone back in her pocket, looking confused as hell. Abbie ran to me, kissing me hard. Taylor was going for Isa’s taser, however, and I quickly cautioned her back.

“You two were incredible. I heard every word. Perfect distraction,” I praised them.

“Distraction?” Cassie frowned. “What do you mean, distraction? Distraction from what?”

“You’re too honest by half, Cassie. I knew you’d do a better job if we let you just be yourself. First off, no, I never want to dose you again. You’re perfect the way you are. I’m sorry I let you doubt it for a second. That goes for all of you. I don’t want to change a thing.”

(Not that I could. *I will never use Serenex on Abbie without her permission.* That paper was in my desk at home, its word etched as irrevocably on my heart. But it was true regardless.)

The words brought back Cassie’s smile. “So you were just fudging with them that whole time? Like a cat with a mouse, huh?”

“Yep. I figured they were good at being scary as hell, while you’re good at being sweet and lovable, so I let you all do what you do best. Meanwhile, I kept the line open with... her,” I pointed to Candy, not wanting to use her name and snap her out of her stupor. “I knew they’d want to ‘fix’ you like they tried to fix me, so I just waited until I was sure the Serenex was in the open and you had Isa’s attention, and then... I told her about my plan.”

“Dumb fucking cunt never saw it coming.” Abbie drew up in Candy’s face and laughed mockingly.

“Oh, they did at first. The good officer was watching her phone – she knew not to trust your coach around me. I worried she might be smart enough to suspect that angle. But I also knew if you came in here armed and dangerous, the officer would be the one dealing with you.”

Abbie eyed at the weapon at her sister’s feet warily. “I seriously thought she was gonna tase us for a sec there, C-dawg.”

“I would’ve for real knifed that bitch. Fuckin’ tase me,” Taylor snarled.

“Wow. You thought of everything!” Cassie gushed. Then she tapped her chin, considering. “I mean, unless they actually did tase them. Or if they sprayed us right away. Or if they saw you pacing up and down the sidewalk back there. I saw you on my way in. Not subtle. Or if they decided not to dose us tonight at all and the Serenex never got out. Or if Coach blocked your number. Or—”

All right, so I was a lucky idiot. I’d take it. “Yes. A lot could have been wrong. But I had some excellent help.” I pulled the three of them in for a group hug and held them tight. Damn it, they felt good.

“So what now?” asked Cassie, looking to the helpless women, standing dazed in their pajamas.

“First off, let me confirm: you all saw the Serenex go in their mouths, right?”

They all nodded. Good. Not falling for that one again. I sniffed the canister. It sure smelled like the same stuff. Weight was right. Still, just to be one hundred percent sure, I supposed I had to check. No more subterfuge. “I need a volunteer to make sure this is the same canister.”

“Uh, what?” Abbie took a step back.

I picked up Isa’s taser and tucked it in my back pocket, just in case. “You heard her. The stuff I bought was contaminated, some kind of... mutt drug. She made it sound at dinner like they weren’t even sure they could reproduce it. But I need to know this is the same stuff, on the off chance they created a fake to throw me off if I tried to steal it.”

“Damn, you’re one paranoid motherfucker, C-dawg.”

“Language, Taylor.” I smiled at her, though. “So one of you. Abbie, you know I will never use Serenex on you without your permission, but the same goes for the others. I’m not going to do anything to you – just make sure it puts you in that trance, then have you chill somewhere safe and quiet until it wears off.”

Abbie and Taylor shook their heads immediately. All three of us slowly turned to Cassie. “Who, me?”

“Please, Cassie?”

“Yeah, come on, Cass, take one for the team.”

“But I don’t wanna do drugs!”

Time to play the pleasure card again, I supposed. Yet even as I opened my mouth to pressure her, I caught the look in her eyes and stopped myself. She was frightened. She was my neighbor. She was a nice person. She was my Cassie. I stopped myself.

“Fine, Cassie. We won’t make you do anything you don’t want to do.”

“Oh thank god.” Her shoulders sagged in relief.

“We don’t have to test shit anyway,” Taylor stated. “It’s real. Don’t believe me? You honestly think that bitch would’ve dropped the taser to play games with us, wait and see what we’d do? She knows what we’re gonna do. She’d have used it if she could.”

“Probably, Taylor, but we need certainty. This is too important to take chances with.”

She sighed irritably. “You want a test? Fine.”

We watched in rapidly mounting horror as Taylor withdrew a massive knife from inside the wide pouch in the front of her hoodie. It looked like the sort of thing you’d see some insecure dude-bro putting on a shelf in his bedroom. Cheaply ornate. It was nonetheless sharp as hell, we all learned, as Taylor raised Isa’s t-shirt, exposing a flat tan stomach. The point of the blade grazed back and forth across the officer’s skin. From this close, I could see where tiny little hairs were being shaved off of her.

“Hey, that’s enough, Taylor.”

“But we gotta be sure, like you said. Don’t we? Not probably. Certainly. That’s what you said, isn’t it?” Suddenly she pulled back the knife, her arm thrusting the point

right at Isa's ribcage. Cassie screamed. Even Abbie at least yelped. I dove at Taylor by reflex, tackling her to the floor and pinning her arm down in the nick of time.

"Are you insane?"

"I wasn't really gonna do it! Get the fuck off of me!"

"That wasn't funny!"

"I ain't laughing!"

A soft hand appeared on my shoulder. I looked back to see Cassie standing over us. Her eyes glanced meaningfully to Isa and Candy, who were now staring right at us.

"Point taken. Everybody shut up, let them drift back off," I said softly. "Thanks, Cassie."

After a short period of quiet, the mind-suppressed women lost interest, and I looked back to Taylor. "I know you don't like her. I know you're pissed about last weekend. That's fair. But we didn't come here tonight for revenge."

"I wasn't gonna stab her! Fuck, I'm not a total psycho. But did you see how she didn't even flinch? Neither of 'em?" Her eyes flashed indignantly. "So there's your test, Einstein. You're welcome."

After a moment, I rolled off of her, then helped her back to her feet once she let go of the knife. I was loath to admit it, but she was right. If I'd been worried enough that Taylor would actually do it, surely one or the other of them would have reacted if they could. Even if Isa was ballsy enough to call her bluff like I'd done over dinner with the taser, Candy never would have stood idly by.

"So, now that we've ruled out murder, what do we actually wanna do with them?"

That was the question on everyone's mind. Any one of us might have asked it. But if there was a lesson I'd learned from tonight's near-catastrophe, it was to avoid making decisions with far-reaching implications without due consideration. First things first, I ushered Isa and Candy into the kitchen. Abbie didn't like having them out of our sight, so at her insistence, we took a minute to find Isa's handcuffs – intriguingly placed in her nightstand – and affixed them together around the refrigerator door. Thus satisfied, my girls and I reconvened in their living room.

"Well?" pressed Abbie when I said nothing. "What do we do?"

"More booty calls?" asked Cassie. "That's a lot of booty, but I guess it'd be nice to have more people to share the load with so I don't have to miss any more track practice or meets or anything."

"You must be the only woman I know who'd rather go to some lame-ass track meet than have amazing life-changing sex," Taylor muttered, making sure it was loud enough Cassie could hear it. I was quietly flattered, but this wasn't the time to preen.

The girls quibbled back and forth, though anyone watching could tell they were all waiting for me to say something. Let them wait. We had hours – all day, if we felt like giving them another spritz or two – and it would only take moments to do the job. The

hundred copies method had been an amusing foray into the allure of abusing teacher-student power dynamics, but it had also been childish and unnecessary. No, I would do this right, and only do this when I knew what “right” meant.

“We do... as little as possible,” I announced at last.

Their conversation ended immediately. “What?!” the Sterns demanded in concert. Even Cassie looked surprised. Abbie scowled through the wall at the two women. “We cannot leave these two backstabbers to do it again. You fucking know they will!”

I held out my hand cautioningly. “I’m not saying we do nothing. We protect ourselves, yes. Keep them from interfering with us, let us go about our affairs without any more shenanigans. But we’re not giving in to revenge.”

“Why the fuck not?! You heard what they was trying to do to your ass!”

Taylor was right behind her, equally livid. “They tased me, they neutered you, they were going to try to mind-fuck the three of us god knows how. No way they get off the hook for that shit! Barbie gave me a week’s suspension one time for cussing—”

“You told her you were going to cunt punt her, or so I heard,” I reminded her.

“—and now they get to pull this shit, and we let them go? No fucking way!”

“Hear me out. I’m mad, too. You know that, right? This past week, what we did this morning... it’s been amazing. It will keep being amazing. They tried to take that from me – from us. As did your mom, Cassie.”

She frowned. “Yeah, I know. But she’s sure sorry now.”

“She is. But you know what? You know why we’re all fighting to keep things the way they are, and they’re resisting harder than we even thought possible? We’re *enjoying* ourselves. Hell, even Cassie’s mom is having some fun with it now that I decided to let her. You know what they got? Bullied, used, and put in the corner. I’m not defending their actions. But if we use our position here to punish them, humiliate them, or whatever very creative ideas I’m sure you two were having, they’re only going to keep resisting.”

“So we tell them to stop resisting,” Taylor rebutted.

“See, though, that’s the other thing. It’s not only about them. I don’t know about you, but I’ve been feeling kinda shitty about some of the things I’ve done the past couple weeks, even though at the same time I’ve been having all this fun. More fun than I’ve ever had before. And I think the reason for those highs and lows is because as lucky as I feel, I know I’ve done some bad stuff.”

“You said to never use the words ‘bad’ or ‘stuff,’ Mr. Canon,” supplied Taylor impishly. We’d discussed that very thing earlier that week. I might get a gradable essay out of her yet.

“In writing, yes, but... Look. Whatever else I’ve done, I think we’ve mostly had fun. But I also got you stuffed in a trunk, Taylor. I made you make that fake video in the



school bathroom. I force-fed Abbie a chemical weapon. I made my neighbor train her own daughter to fuck me better. And I dragged those two women into this, forced them to betray some of their deepest convictions for my own selfish reasons.”

“Like them trying to cut your dick off wasn’t selfish?” Taylor snapped.

I folded my hands in my lap. Time to be a teacher. “Do you remember last year in American lit, we read about the feud between the Hatfields and McCoys?”

“No.”

“Two families, bitter blood feud, dozens dead and jailed? Anything?” Though I’d had neither Cassie nor Abbie as students in that class, I at least saw recognition register on their faces.

“No. Guess I had a suck-ass teacher.”

I smiled. “Evidently. Anyway, the point of it all is that seeking revenge only made it worse, not just for the people being attacked and killed, but for the attackers, too. We made our peace with all this craziness because we all found something – someone – to enjoy. They didn’t. And I’m not going to dirty my hands and further stain my conscience. No more. I am done, Taylor. Done dragging out this mess by trying to control everyone around me.

“They were wrong about the harm I caused you. They were right, though, that I’d done wrong. Now I could try to outsmart them, outmaneuver them, burn my right to do whatever I want into their heads. Or I could give them back their lives and their happiness. We could all of us simply go on as people with a weird secret who sometimes wave hi to each other in the halls.”

Cassie scooted over next to me and rested her head on my shoulder. “That was nice, Mr. Canon. I liked that. I always liked Coach Salata. It would have been sad if we did something to hurt her. I vote yes.”

“We’re not voting,” I said quickly to forestall the Sterns’ predictable reaction of imposing a tie. “But I’m glad. What about you two? Can you get on board with it?”

The two looked long at one another until Abbie prompted her sister to speak first. “Can I at least tase her once?”

“No. No tasing. Before you ask, no stabbing, either.”

She’d been joking – mostly – but she wasn’t about to let the issue slide with a mere quip. “Honestly? This is a pussy-ass move is what I think. I think this is a weak little bitch move. I think this is an ugly fucking side of you, C-dawg. That’s what I think. But hey, you can do whatever you want to me, right? Not like I get a say.”

I didn’t have a response to that. I am not a pussy, but that didn’t mean I had to be a ruthless asshole, either. With her case made, however, Taylor shrugged and deferred to Abbie. Abbie, who had been so quiet throughout my little pep talk that I hadn’t noticed that livid expression on her face.

“Abbie? You’ve been quiet. Use your words.”

The young woman had a talent for imposing uncomfortable silence, I'd give her that. She let us stew in that glare of hers, marinating in disapprobation.

"I think you were right before."

"Before? I said a lot of things, Abbie. Which one?"

"That we need to test it. The Serenex. Make sure it's really working. You know, in case."

"I appreciate the uncharacteristic abundance of caution and all – better late than never. I think Taylor adequately proved that for us, though."

"Nah, I'm not so sure. I think we ought to test."

"So you want to volunteer after all?" I retorted.

"I think we should test it on you," said Abbie.

To me.

Oh, fuck.

"Hey, I get that you're not liking my decision, but–"

"Give me the Serenex."

"Right, sure." I immediately hopped up and started carrying it over to her. Abbie could use my Serenex any time she wanted. Now she wanted to use it on me, though, which meant I had mere seconds to talk her down. The obvious thing to do would be to spray her first, but I will never use Serenex on Abbie without her permission. It didn't look like she meant to grant it.

"I'm not so sure that's a good idea, Mr. Canon," Cassie said nervously, shrinking into the corner of the sofa.

"Abbie, yeah, let's not go fucking crazy, right?"

"Shut the fuck up, Taylor."

Taylor obeyed. What choice did she have? Abbie was the boss of her.

"Abbie, please. Let's talk about this. I want to hear what you're feeling, OK? Just don't do anything rash. That's how we all got into this mess in the first place."

"No, *this* is how we got into this mess in the first place," she said, snatching the canister from my hand. She raised the nozzle and pointed it at my face. The girl was going to dose me, then march into the kitchen and do god only knew what to Candy and Isa. So much for my troubles being over. My mind was frantically exploring options, but my planning hadn't covered this contingency. There was only one thing left to do.

I opened my mouth wide.

Damnit all to hell if it didn't taste even worse the second time around.