

Teaching Her A Lesson

Part Eight: Differentiated Instruction

There. My desk was put back together. Better double check and make sure nobody dribbled anything anywhere. Hmm. Couple little spots where Taylor didn't get her mouth in place on time. Some tissue, dab dab dab, aaaand good. Cleaned up. Very good. One thing down.

Cassie yawned, the first sound she'd made since I'd pumped her full of Serenex. Somehow it made her look even less alert.

Now, what else needs doing...

Knock, knock, knock.

“Can’s in the hallway! Testing!” I called once my heart started beating again.

“It’s Candace and Louisa,” came the reply.

Cassie blinked. Sort of. One eye, then the other a second later. But that was about it.

I let them in.

Their expressions said they knew perfectly well what had transpired between me and the Stern sisters this afternoon. At least in terms of the carnal, that is. Not the other thing. Even so, their disapproval was apparent.

“Is she...?”

I nodded. These two had never been around someone in a Serenex ingestion trance before, other than each other when I’d put them both under. “Try not to do anything too loud, say her name, poke at her. If we let her stay adrift like this, it’s safe to talk around her.”

They each studied her for a moment, but one by one turned back to me. “So Isa said she confessed?”

“Yeah. Actually had the guts to act like we were overreacting. Kids these days, ya know.”

My colleague sighed at my attempt at humorous hubris. “You do realize we’re the same generation as her, right? You’re what, twenty-eight?”

“Twenty-six. But millennial, gen Z. Apples and oranges.”

“Look, whatever. So how did it go? Once you finished defiling Taylor and Abbie, that is.”

“You’re one to talk, Candy. And... well, I haven’t quite started yet. Quite.”

Louisa piped up. “Haven’t started? When you kicked me out, you were ready to chew her up and spit her out. I don’t think she’s capable of appreciating your very sinister bidding of time when she’s like this.”

“I’ll do it when I’m good and ready.”

“You’re not ready?” Both women spoke on top of one another, and Isa continued. “You had all last night and all day today. How hard can it be to tell her not to blackmail you, and if you’re feeling vindictive, to feel guilty about trying?”

Candy dug deeper, asking, “You don’t mean... emotionally ready, do you?” *Pussy*, added her expression.

“I’m not... Rather, she isn’t...” I rounded on them. “Look, it’s a little more complicated than that.”

Eyes were narrowing at me. I tried not to shrink away from them, but having screwed up this spectacularly, it wasn’t easy. “It’s nothing to worry about, but... there was a small... accident.”

“An accident,” Candy repeated.

“What kind of accident?” probed Isa. *Moron*, added her expression.

“I’m managing it.”

“If I’m going to help keep your nuts out of the cracker, Canon, I need to know what’s going on. Don’t b.s. me. You might be pulling the strings with those girls, but when it comes to OPSEC, I’m in charge.”

This was a good reminder why women in uniform didn’t do it for me. I sighed, thinking truly unpleasant thoughts about Abbie and what I’d do to her if she crossed my path right now. No sense trying to dodge the truth with these two. “All right. So, Abbie... said some things. To Cassie.”

The women shared a look before Candy asked, “What kind of things?”

“Not to be crude, but... well, along the lines of making Cassie a bit more like her.”

“What’s ‘like her’ mean? A bully? A bitch? A narcissist?” she pressed.

“A sex slave?” said Isa more directly.

“That one. Now look, before you go flying off the handle,” I raised my hands defensively as they both plainly prepared to do just that, “it wasn’t my idea. She caught me off guard, blurting some things out before I could shut her up. I dismissed them both immediately after. She will be reprimanded when the time presents itself, I assure you.”

Candy took a seat in a vacant desk on the opposite side from where Cassie sat. Isa was content to remain standing, asking, “And will this stern talking-to of yours undo what she did?”

“Well, no, but—”

“Then maybe we ought to focus on what needs to happen here and now. So you said some things were blurted. What kinds of things?”

I tried to think. “Something like, it would be fun to sleep with me, nothing unusual about it. Like that.”

“Oh come on, you expect us to believe that!” exclaimed the resource officer. “Don’t blame those girls. At every turn you’ve been scheming to use that crap to force women to—”

Candy shushed her, though, and we all watched Cassie a moment until we were sure she wasn’t stirring. I chimed in before Isa could go on. “It’s not my fault! I know how it looks, but it really isn’t. I told you yesterday, Taylor said some things to me – sarcastically – that wound up sinking in for her sister. Now her sister can’t separate these new thoughts from her old ones, and it’s making her act out. Come on, Candy, you saw her yesterday, the lengths she was willing to go to be the sort of girl she thought would make me happy.”

“Is that what that was,” Isa grumbled with a sidelong look at her girlfriend. Ex-girlfriend? I didn’t know what had been happening in their household since she’d caught Candy’s tongue buried in a student’s pussy.

“I’m serious. You saw how she was playing a character, didn’t you? She says she’s my ‘fantasy slut,’ that they’re ‘lucky to have me.’ And with that in her head, and Cassie threatening to blow open our whole operation—”

Candy frowned. “It’s an operation now?”

“Figuratively. But Abbie overreacted. And anyway, it’s done now, so it doesn’t matter. All we can do now is press forward, figure out how to make it as right as we can.”

I gave them a moment to join me in acceptance and brainstorming. How must I seem to them? How had things gone so far? Thankfully, when Candy next spoke up, it wasn’t to criticize, but to be productive. “How sure are you that she heard what Abbie said? Is there a way to tell if she internalized it?”

“You can ask her yourself. Just stick to questions and she should be fine. It seems to be a lot like teaching when they stayed up too late the night before. They can sleep through anything until you say their name.”

She nodded, then crossed the room and knelt in front of Cassie. The girl didn’t look up, not even when the teacher joined hands with her. “Cassie? Cassie, can you hear me?”

“Yeah, Coach.” Coach? Oh right, volleyball. I’d forgotten they were already close. No wonder she was pissed. Then again, she’d been the sweet giggly neighbor kid to me for years; amazing how fast goodwill dried up in the face of most of a year’s salary in ransom demands.

For Candy, though, it was a relief to be recognized. I wanted to assure her that she’d looked just as out of it and she’d come out fine, but I let her go on and learn for herself. “Did either of the Stern girls say anything unusual to you earlier this afternoon?”

Cassie nodded. “Yeah.”

The ladies waited for her to go on, but she didn’t. Isa came around, sparing a brief disgusted look for me. Like I was the one who’d made her blackmail me! Her attitude was beginning to annoy me. “What did they say? Cassie? What happened?”

“Taylor invited me to use her chapstick. I thought it was kind of gross but I was afraid of her so I said yes. It wasted kinda bad, too. I was just glad she didn’t start anything. I heard one time Taylor was drunk at a party at Maxine Wightman’s house and she tried to kiss Ian only Ian was dating Anna so he said no, and she took someone’s lighter and burned his arm.”

It was a small vindication that my suspicion that the chapstick would work and for pretty much that exact reason, though I’d expected her fear would be more social consequence than pyromania. Regardless, with the slow, dreamy way of talking Cassie had taken on, we’d be here all night if we didn’t cut to the chase. Candy simply rolled her eyes and went on. “What about Abbie? Did she say anything weird to you?”

“No, Coach.”

Both women turned to me, confused, but it caught me off-guard, too. Was it possible she hadn't heard somehow? "You didn't hear Abbie say anything?" I asked. Why was part of me disappointed?

The feeling didn't last long, though. "Do you mean when she said, 'Doesn't it look fun to pleasure Mr. Canon, Mr. Canon?'"

"There it is," Isa grumbled. "Why didn't you say that before?"

"Ms. Salata asked if she said anything weird."

"And that's not weird?!"

The question had been rhetorical, but Cassie answered nevertheless. "There's nothing wrong with it. It feels amazing being his personal booty call. I should, totally." She made a little squeak noise, which I suppose was her approximation of the sound Abbie had made when I'd mashed Taylor's boob in her mouth.

With the mystery solved, I could tell Candy was about to make a cutting remark at me, but my warning look kept her from saying it in front of Cassie. Taylor's sarcasm in front of her compromised sister had already done enough damage. "I see. Do... do you believe her?" asked Isa.

"I guess so."

"Why? Why do you guess so?"

"Because what she said is true."

"But... how do you know it's true?"

"I dunno. Just a feeling. But I know."

"So you don't know, but you know?" Candance countered. "Cassie, that's—"

"That's enough, Candy."

"But she's—"

"We're not improvising this. We're sticking to my plan."

Like yesterday, all it took was the assertion that I had a plan to shatter her resistance. We walked with Isa to the far side of the room, and like that, Cassie went back into her shell. "All right. So what's the plan?"

"If it involves making that girl into your 'booty call,' then let's skip past it and get to the backup plan," stated the officer firmly.

"But here's the problem with that," I said, choosing my words carefully, doing my best to project calm reason. I'd had time to think this over, and I knew that when it came to selling it to my co-conspirators, it wasn't going to be easy.

Here goes.

"Those things that Serenex put in our heads... they're very deeply ingrained, as you both know. Enough that Abbie stuffed her sister in the trunk of her car. That those two young women and I are doing things none of us ever imagined we might a week ago. That even you two, who received a much lighter touch, have allowed things to happen that you otherwise never would have."

Isa placed her hands on her hips. “We know all this. Get to the point.”

“In short, my point is that I’m honestly worried about what might happen if we try to put two directly conflicting ideas in her head.”

Isa could already see where this was going. “Canon...”

“Before you go accusing me of ulterior motives, keep in mind that for one, let’s remember we’re dealing with an extortionist. I looked it up, and you can do twenty years for what she’s done.”

Before Isa could point out how unlikely Cassie was to receive the max sentence, I hurried to my next point. “For two, just because Abbie put these feelings in her head doesn’t mean I have to indulge them. I already have, as you put it yesterday, two ‘nubile sex slaves’ – a categorization I don’t agree with, but for purposes of my point, I’ll temporarily concede the basic nature of it. Point being, it’s not as if I didn’t already have an outlet for... that.”

“Is there a three,” Isa prompted dryly.

“For three, let’s look at it like this. If I said I planned to go all in, embrace Abbie’s plan and turn her into an actual sex slave... what would the two of you do about it? Not what do you *think* should be done, but if I did it, right now... what would you actually do?”

Neither was in a hurry to speak up. “I... I guess I’d make sure you got her the way you wanted her,” mumbled Candy sheepishly.

Isa looked at her lover aghast, but as I prompted her again for her own response, her indignation faded. “I’d tell you you’re a piece of shit,” she said softly, “and then figure out how to make sure nobody caught you.”

“That you would. Now – suppose you found out someone was going to... liberate her, I suppose you’d say. Set her free, try to fix her. What would you do then?”

“Nothing good,” mumbled Isa sullenly. Candy said nothing, which said it all.

“See, so this is my point. Look what you’d do, thanks to how Serenex transformed your thinking. It somehow seems to overpower every other consideration. So what happens, then, if we try to use it to counteract itself? Suppose I dosed you again, Isa, and told you to beat me black and blue and drag me down to the station to tell them everything?”

“I would *never* do that!” she insisted automatically. In the next breath, she understood me. “I... yeah. Shit. I don’t know.”

“Exactly. Abbie already fired the unstoppable bullet; if we then put an immovable wall in that girl’s head, we could cause some kind of complete psychotic break. I do realize, I really do, that what Abbie did is wrong. But right now, all she’ll have is a more colorful version of a schoolgirl crush on a teacher. If we try to tell her she doesn’t... we may well do a lot more harm than good.”

I gave them a moment to think it over. They even huddled in the corner to discuss privately, as if I couldn't hear it all anyway. With their deliberation proceeding in the direction I wanted, I said nothing.

"Do what you have to do, Mr. Canon," said Candy sullenly.

"Fair enough." I was a bit relieved that she paused to give Isa a swift kiss before she left, directing a lingering look at her athlete before excusing herself from the room. Then it was down to me, Cassie, and the officer.

"So like the woman said, we're resigned to this. When we're done here today, though, I need you to give me the Serenex canister so I can have it tested. I'll make up a story about where I found it, something that won't lead back to you. Don't worry about that. But we need to know more about this before you fuck up someone else's life like you did ours."

It was only my relief to have successfully persuaded them that kept me from responding in kind. "Why? We have plenty of it left – that canister was meant to disperse a mob, and so far we've spritzed it a half dozen times. A few teaspoons, maybe. We have more than enough to reapply doses if needed."

"But you don't know that you'll get any warning before that happens, do you?" She took a step forward, and though I had a few inches on her, it certainly didn't feel that way as her tone darkened. "I can tell you right now, if I wake up one morning and that crap is out of my head, out of Candace's head... I can't guarantee you'll make it to jail. You get me?"

My head cocked back. "Is that a threat?"

The question seemed to confuse her for a moment. "Of course not. I'm your protector, after all. Just think of it as good advice. Very, very good advice."

"So noted, Officer. Thanks."

"Don't thank me. Now we got work to do, so let's bite the bullet already."

She withdrew, and I was amazed at how much easier I could breathe. How could I be so frightened by someone who I knew for a certainty couldn't hurt me? I glared at her shapely backside as she made her way back to the far side of the room. *Don't treat me like a pussy!* I wanted to scream at her, except what could be more of a pussy thing to do than that?

For the first time since I'd dosed her, I approached Cassie, pulling up a desk in front of her, seating us face to face. Her eyes were barely open. Had she fallen asleep? No, when I said her name, those soft green orbs slowly focused on me, a bit dazed and droopy, but focused nonetheless.

After jotting down a few words on it myself, I slid a piece of paper across the desk, along with a pen. Inwardly I chuckled; my policy on lending students a pen was to take collateral to make sure I got them back, but I supposed I had reasonable assurances

of its return. “Cassie, I want you to read the words I wrote on that paper and copy them a hundred times. All right?”

“Sure, Mr. Canon.” She picked up the pen, and I watched to make sure she was getting it right. From a few feet farther away, Isa watched for the same. *I will protect Mr. Canon’s secrets.*

Simple and straightforward. That was important. Misinterpretation or using too broad strokes could foul this up in a hurry. This should both nullify her threats of blackmail as well as make sure that if or when Cassie noticed anything happening that might be a threat to me, she’d help me regain control. Isa and I watched as she copied it, and little by little, I began to relax.

I relaxed for the first twenty or thirty repetitions, anyway. I hadn’t realized at first that Cassie’s huge, loopy handwriting was taking a lot longer than it had the others. By the time she was nearing fifty, I decided that was good enough and told her to stop.

“Can’t. Need to do a hundred,” she murmured, continuing unabated.

Isa and I shared an exasperated look, but I didn’t push things. On some level it was a relief. Her minuscule defiance here wasn’t confirmation that we couldn’t plant contradictory commands in her, but that we’d told her to do something and then been unable to tell her to stop corroborated my suspicion at least. With that, we let her go. Even after the encounter with the Sterns and the conference beforehand, it was still only just past four. Cassie’s predecessors had all needed several hours before waking up. Candy had needed over four. We simply needed to be patient. Everything was taken care of now; all that was left was to—

My phone buzzed. Cassie was on line eighty-two. I fished my phone out of my pocket, and...

It was the number. The blackmailer. “What the hell...?!”

ARE YOU READY FOR INSTRUCTION? read the text.

I looked to Cassie, as if she might have covertly sent the text without alerting me. She was starting eighty-three.

“What is it?” asked Isa, concerned.

“It’s... them. It’s that number.” I held up the phone.

Not surprisingly, Isa was analyzing the caper faster than I was. “Shit. She has a collaborator. Dammit, I was worried about something like this.”

“Shit! Cassie, did... Cassie, look at me. Cassie, stop.”

“Can’t. Writing a hundred times. Almost done.” Splitting her diminished capacity for attention actually made her even *slower!*

“Cassie...!”

But she shushed me. She shushed me! “Not yet.”

“Relax, Canon,” said Isa, putting a soft hand on my shoulder before I could go fully apoplectic. “She’ll be done in a minute, and then she’ll be able to talk. Not

surprising, really. Having someone else know the secret is a good failsafe to prevent someone from getting leverage over her. Plus she's a high school girl. Not a one of them who can keep their mouths shut worth a damn."

"But what if she told all her friends! What if—"

"She didn't. Man up, OK? She obviously didn't. For one, if there was a rumor going around school about you fucking Abbie Stern, one of us would have heard about it. For two, if she wants her money, she has to at least keep the secret until she gets her hands on it."

"But she already told someone!"

"Hey. Calm down. You're panicking, and we can't have you panicking around someone in her condition. Most likely scenario, she told one other person. Now take a few breaths, grow a pair, and keep them occupied on the phone while we wait for Cassie to finish up. And remember, don't tip them off that we know about the kid. Whoever that is probably feels nervous enough as it is, and we don't want them pissing themselves either."

My fist clenched, and not only because of the avalanche of anxiety crashing down on me. Officer Barbour sure knew how to push my buttons. She was, however, right. Annoyingly. Her suggestion of deep breathing actually did help. Cassie's scribing was still advancing in its glacial way. Eighty-seven now.

What assurances do I have that those pictures will get deleted? I typed slowly, reasoning Cassie's ally would see I was replying and thus not do anything rash in the midst of it. Plus, avoiding answering their question could drag it out a little longer. My students had taught me this tactic well.

Eighty-nine.

NONE BUT YOU HAVE MY WORD

*YOU TRYING TO BACK OUT? I CAN SEND THEM TO THE WIDE WORLD
BEFORE YOU CAN BLINK BUDDY*

Ninety-one.

My fingers wanted to sprint, but I kept them on a tight leash. *I'm not backing out of anything. You're getting your money.*

Ninety-two.

GOOD

I WANT YOU TO LEAVE THE MONEY ON YOUR BACK POUCH

**PORCH*

A blackmailer who couldn't bother to proofread before hitting send. Karmic justice for a wayward English teacher, I supposed.

THEN I WANT YOU TO GET IN YOUR CAR AND TEXT ME

ILL TELL YOU WHERE TO DRIVE

WHEN YOU GET THERE, SEND ME A PIC SO I KNOW

Ninety-four. Hurry the hell up, Cassie!

That's fine, but... how do you know I won't have someone else watching?

DO YOU????????????

I rolled my eyes. *Of course not, but obviously someone who did wouldn't tell you they did.* Good god, did Cassie and her little friend not even google "blackmail" before they dove into this?

YOU BETTER NOT!!!!!!!!!!!!

Ninety-six. I silently cursed her third-grade teacher for cursive lessons so heavily over-prioritized form over efficiency. Isa was reading over my shoulder, though I credited her with looking a good deal more serene than I felt.

I don't, I promise. But I'm at work now, and I have a few things I need to finish up. It might be an hour or more before I can get home.

LEAVE NOW

IT TAKES TEN MINUTES TO GET HOME

ILL GIVE YOU FIFTEEN TO SEND ME A PIC OF YOUR GARAGE DOOR SO I KNOW YOUR THEIR

Ow. Just... OW. I looked over.

Ninety-nine.

omw. There was nothing else to say.

The pen clicked as she set it on the desktop. "Done, Mr. Canon." She even handed me my pen back.

Officer Barbour escorted Cassie to the lot, practically pushing her to keep her moving. I went on ahead, and when the officer judged it clear, we stuffed Cassie in my backseat, lying on her side, and I got the hell out of there. Isa was going to follow behind as a just in case; she'd wanted to ride with us, but I insisted we were taking enough of a risk with me and Cassie without adding even more potential questions with her presence.

There was no time to waste. Traffic this time of day wasn't helping, either, so I steered down side streets, skipping stop signs wherever it was safe. Meanwhile, it was finally time to interrogate this little bitch about how much blabbing she'd done.

"Cassie? Are you listening?"

"Yep, Mr. C," came a voice muffled by the seats.

"Good. Now Cassie, you need to be completely honest with me. Understand? Tell me the complete and total truth, no mat—" I caught myself, proud I still had some small amount of my wits functioning in spite of everything. "The complete and total truth, so long as it's only me and the other people who know my secrets." A list that was already too long for my liking by far. "Do you understand?"

"Yeah." She didn't elaborate, but with nine minutes to make it home, I didn't have time to waste on repetitions.

"Good. Now tell me, Cassie. Who else did you tell about me and Abbie?"

"Miss Salata, and Officer Barbour."

"What?" Oh right, when I'd had them question her. "No, *before* today!"

"It only happened today, Mr. Canon."

I tilted the rear view mirror down, but all I could see of her was one hip. The seats blocked the rest of her. "What do you mean, you didn't know before today? Cassie, remember, you have to tell me the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. We know you sent me those messages. We know you bought that prepaid phone. We know you took those pictures."

"I... I don't... My mom pays for my phone. Me and Robby's. I didn't send you any messages or take any pictures of you."

"Bullshit. Officer Barbour said it was *your* credit card that bought that phone."

"It wasn't me. I swear."

Despite the girl's deadpan words, my mind was on fire. Had Isa lied to me? Was she in on it?! Had I left some loophole, some way she could exploit the situation to—

"My mom could have done that though. We both have a copy of the card. She made a big deal about telling me not to go near your house the other day."

A car horn blared as I ran through a red light. If either of us had swerved a moment later, they would have T-boned me, right there by where Cassie's head was resting on the seat. The girl didn't so much as sit up, just squeaked when her head banged against the car door.

We'd gotten the wrong person. Fuck me, we'd gotten the wrong person!

Detail after detail clicked into place. The atrocious grammar – classic Megan. All caps? It had been a couple years since I'd hidden her on facebook for screaming in her posts, but that was her all right. I'd long known she wasn't an especially bright woman, but I gave her a pass the same as she did for my intellectual snobbery. And the money! Of course, the money! A daughter hoping to go to college in the fall, and things had always been tight for them thanks to her deadbeat ex-husband. Must be tighter than I'd realized – or maybe Megan was simply a greedy bitch.

I slowed a hair through the next intersection, this time avoiding a brush with death. It didn't sting any less that it was Megan Brown and not her daughter Cassie. Only... “So why did you admit to it before I dosed you, Cassie?!”

“I didn't.”

“Yes you did! I asked you why you were trying to steal from me, and you said you thought you were doing the right thing? Ringing any bells?”

“I thought you were mad about the coupon books for the volleyball fundraiser.”

“But you said you were going to use my money to send you and your brother college!”

“There's a scholarship for the girl who sells the most. And if I go to college, I can get a good job and help my brother go, too.”

Dear god. Any other time it would have been touching. Right now, it made me want to scream.

We crossed Route 2. Just over a mile to go. Shit shit shit! What did I do now? I couldn't dose *another* woman. This was already approaching insanity. If I had a couple more hours, I might be able to use Cassie to talk her mother down, make her see reason. I didn't have hours, though. I had just over four minutes. Isa wouldn't be far behind. My pet policewoman wasn't going to be much help, though. She couldn't arrest Megan for blackmail without the blackmail coming out; if she didn't arrest her, there was no guarantee she wouldn't disseminate a backup of those pictures the moment she and Isa part company.

I turned into my subdivision. There was no time for elaborate plans. Nothing left but that damned spray. Megan didn't know I was on to her. I'd go over, knock on the door, then spray her the moment it opened. Then one last no-secret-blabbing indoctrination, and that would be that. And this time, nothing more complicated like that shitshow at Starbucks.

Megan scrunched down at my command. For good measure, I tossed my jacket over her back. We pulled into the driveway with less than a minute to spare. Once the car was parked, I snapped a picture of the garage door and sent it to the offending phone number.

I'm here.

Her response came so quickly that it had to have been pre-typed. *GOOD. SET THE MONEY ON THE BACK PORCH THEN GET BACK IN YOUR CAR AND GO*

Suddenly I realized my plan had been stupid. Megan was in all probability watching us right now. If she saw me get out of the car and start towards her house, she could get paranoid – rightly so – and she could pull the trigger before I had my shot. Dammit! What did I do? If I'd taken up the ladies on their offer to front the cash, I could have at least passed it along and bought some time. As things stood, though–

DO IT NOW

No doubt about it. I was being watched. And Megan was impatient.

The garage door creaked and groaned open, and I pulled in. “Come with me, Cassie.” Luckily there were no windows in here, and it was adjoined to the house. Her mother wouldn't see I had her daughter with me. That was imperative now.

Not knowing what else to do, I grabbed my gym bag and started filling it with books from the shelf in my office. How big was \$25,000? I had no idea. But I doubted Megan knew either. Meanwhile, I was conveying instructions to her daughter as quickly as I could while still watching my phrasing to keep from further warping this apparently innocent girl's mind.

I had no idea if this was going to work, but it was all I had.

“All right Cassie. I'm going to put this bag on the back porch, and then leave. I want you to stand by the back door. In a few minutes, someone is going to come over and take the bag. When they do, I want you to take this...” I put the Serenex in her hand. Oh god, what was I doing?! This girl shouldn't have a weapon like this in hand if she were in full command of her faculties, much less...! “Then I want you to open the door and spray this into her mouth. Cassie? It *has* to be into their mouth. Keep spraying at them until you get some in there. Do you understand?”

“I... think so.”

That wasn't especially convincing. “Tell me what's going to happen, Cassie.”

“You'll put that on the porch, then leave. Someone is going to come over and take it. I'll take that and spray them. Until I spray it into their mouth.”

“Very good. And then just stop and wait for me. OK?”

“OK.”

I guided her where I wanted her to wait, where she could see through the window set in the door to watch for her mother. “I'm sorry, for what it's worth,” I said, then took my bag and stepped out. The heavy bag thudded as it slammed down on the bricks of the porch. I forced myself not to look up at the Browns' house across the fence and reveal my knowledge of who was watching. Then I walked around the outside of the house and back into the garage. My phone was ringing as I walked. Isa, I saw. Megan was the only communication I was answering right then, though. She didn't take long, the alert buzzing before I reached the end of the driveway.

DRIVE TO THE ARBY'S ON THE NORTH SIDE OF TOWN

TEXT ME A SELFIE OF YOU IN FRONT OF THE DRIVE-THRU MENU

Arby's? Classy. *Want me to pick you up anything?*

JUST DO IT

NOW!!

So much for humor. I backed out of the driveway and pulled out into the street. Meanwhile Isa was hitting the redial.

“What the hell is going on up there?” she demanded. “Did you just leave?”

“I have it taken care of,” I said vaguely.

“What does that mean?”

“It means, stay away. You’re only going to make this worse if you get involved. I have it in hand, I promise.”

The phone moved away from her mouth to growl in frustration. “People always think that they know better than the professionals. You’re in over your head, and I can’t keep letting you fuck this up like you’ve fucked up every other thing in this whole mess!”

My jaw clenched. “I need to get off the phone before I get pulled over by the real cops.”

“I *am* a real—”

I hung up. Fuck things up, did I? She was the one who’d pushed the idea of Serenex into my head in the first place! The one who’d pegged the wrong person as the blackmailer! The one whose brilliant sting operation had painted me into the corner, nearly blown our secrets! I couldn’t wait to show her how I’d made this work *in spite of* her hamstringing me. Tasing Taylor. Guilting Candy for what was probably one of the hottest experiences of her life. Acting like I couldn’t handle myself, like I was some kind of... of... of pussy! *I am not a pussy!*

It was a good half hour to Arby’s and back. (*Arby’s, Megan? Seriously?*) Not that I had any intention of going. I figured she’d wait a few minutes to make sure I didn’t pull a one-eighty at the end of the block. Maybe not. Either way, I circled the neighborhood a few times, giving her ample time to work up the nerve to go get her “money.” I drove until my frayed nerves couldn’t take it any more. So like, three minutes.

I pulled into the driveway at a crawl. Yes, objectively it was pure idiocy trying to sneak back in, like the car had tip toes or something. Once I was there out of the car, though, my instincts reversed themselves and I sprinted around to the back of the house. Had Cassie come through for me?

Standing there on my porch, sure enough, were two women. One of them was Megan Brown, two long stripes of sepia fluid staining her face. One of them led right into her mouth, which hung open.

Next to her, similarly slack-jawed, stood Louisa Barbour.

I looked around, but saw no sign of Cassie. Then I opened the back door only to find she'd been standing on the other side, so close her nose had probably been pressing against the glass. Stand and wait, I'd said. And she'd done it.

"Cassie? What happened!"

"I did what you said. Then Officer Barbour showed up."

"I didn't say to...! Oh, never mind." Why bother chastising her? It had worked out well enough. "Cassie, Megan, Isa? Inside. Now."

Every door was locked, every curtain drawn, every phone confiscated. At long last, I was in total control of the situation. No more interference from the outside, no more unknown variables making a mess of things. Time to make things right.

“Well now, Isa,” I began, kneeling down in front of her. “Let’s talk.”