III

“I don’t understand why you’re coming down on me so hard!”

It had been an awkward shift between aunt and niece. Most of them were awkward now, as the resentment built up gradually on both sides. Serena had barely said a word to her that wasn’t related to orders and relaying questions from customers for the rest of their shift that afternoon. And the ride home had been just as painfully awkward. The two of them barely said a word the whole ride home.

It wasn’t until the door slammed behind Serena that things came pouring out.

“I need to know that I can depend on you, Ree.”

“You say that like I know what that means—what am I doing *wrong*?”

“I can’t depend on you to get to work on time, and I can’t depend on you to tell me when you got papers due the morning after until right before I need you at work.”

Serena had straddled her unease at skimming from the top of Reese’s college fund with the saddle of her niece’s scholarships. If she kept her grades up, then Reese would never need to know about what her aunt had done to keep her business afloat. And that newfound anxiety on an already prominent emphasis on grades had resulted in her doubling down on Reese.

Both out of guilt and necessity.

“What do you want me to do about Kyla’s classes not getting out on time? She gave me a ride!”

“You *know* that I need you back here at a certain time.” Serena pointed a finger accusatorily, “You’re twenty years old, you oughta know how to make sure you can get to work.”

Reese crossed her arms over what had become a worryingly large potbelly. Part of the profits that had been coming from the sudden success of Sweets by Serena had certainly gone to keeping the two of them living comfortably, and that included blowing some of it on trips to the store to fit her niece’s growing figure. Where had her athletic little girl gone? A plump roll of brown tum edged out from underneath her top as Reese adopted a defensive stance as if to answer her question.

If Serena couldn’t trust her to take care of her body, and she couldn’t trust her to take care of getting to work on time, then she knew for damn sure that she couldn’t trust Reese with her studies—and that was the last thing that *either* of them needed right now.

“I think you’re spending too much time with Kyla.” Serena finally said after a pensive pause, “I know she’s your girlfriend, but you’ve got to think about priorities—”

“I was *late*, o*kay*, I’m *sorry*, but what the fuck See you can’t just—”

“I’m not tellin’ you to break up with her Reese, do *not* take that tone with me.”

Thus followed a long talk about responsibility, and how she shouldn’t take things for granted. The sort of thing that a girl and her parental figure would go over a hundred thousand times. But this time was perhaps the only time that she had a reason to feel guilty for giving one. Sure, in the moment it was easy to deflect her anger at herself at Reese, but she knew why she was cracking down so hard even as passions grew high.

“If I had even *half* the opportunities that you do to go to work *for spare money* during college instead of having to put yourself through it?”

Even she would admit that she was being a little harsh. Serena hadn’t torn into Reese like this in years, since she got caught shoplifting with her little friends for middle school clout. But at the same time, this was something that needed to happen. Reese *had* to learn how to take care of herself. If she could keep her scholarship for just another year, then Serena would have enough time to pay her back.

So she *had* to crack down hard.

“If I were you I’d stop thinking about your future with Kyla and start thinking about your future at college.”

That had been too low of a blow, and Serena knew it.

But if this is what it took to get Reese back on track, then so be it.

Ever since she was a little kid, Reese had always turned to food for comfort.

Back when she lived with her mom, food wasn’t always guaranteed. And it sort of became this weird thing where she’d eat a whole box of Oreos just to feel better, even if she just wound up feeling worse after. And even if she wasn’t hungry.

Reese had always played enough sports at school to avoid turning into some fat kid. And by the time she hit high school, she was downright well-adjusted. But with all the stress that she had been under with her grades and her girlfriend and her parttime job, Reese had started to slip long before she got reamed out by her aunt.

Oreos wouldn’t be enough this time.

Crumbs dusted full lips and fell off the corners as Reese stuffed one of the cupcakes that she had stolen from the fridge. They were excess stock for the store, but she didn’t give a shit. With the way that her aunt had just talked to her, *about* her, to her face like that…

Reese wasn’t going to be okay for a while.

“Mmphm…”

Plump, brown heft swelled over her pajama pants as her stomach fought for supremacy against her shirt. Full, round breasts spread against the fabric, the remnants of a milk spillage having yet to fade from trickling down over Reese’s engorged right tit. She sat on the floor of her bedroom, surrounded by empty wrappers, and one of the spare gallons of milk that her Aunt Serena kept in the fridge to help wash down her ill-gotten goods.

The dressing down that she had received wasn’t just one of those run-of-the-mill parenting moments. Reese might have been slacking, sure, but the intensity with which her aunt had come down on her was far from called for.

“Aaaa*mph*…”

Shallow labored breathing filled the apartment bedroom as Reese popped most of another cupcake past her lips. There was a certain heaviness in the air around her—a warmth that hadn’t been brought upon by the changing temperature, but instead by the uncomfortable fog that descended upon poor Reese as she struggled to make sense of her feelings. The heat behind her eyes remained long after the tears had dried—now all she was doing was trying to feel better.

And it wasn’t working all that well.

She had texted Kyla. She had made the obligatory status on social media. She’d done everything that she knew to do that was a “healthy” option. But for some reason, the only thing that Reese felt like would make her feel better was to stuff her face full of enough sugar and sweets that she got a bellyache. And when the bellyache came, the only thing that really happened was that the button flew off of her jeans. She just kept eating. It was the only thing that made sense to her in the moment, in the wake of getting chewed out to the nth degree like she had been.

“Haha*hhh*…” she clutched either side of her pudgy brown stomach, struggling to breath as she battled against the sheer capacity of the thing, “ooough…”

Maintaining this L-shaped ennui against the wall of her childhood bedroom was exhausting. With how much she’d stuffed herself with, in addition to her added heft, Reese could barely maintain this position on a full belly. But laying on the floor would have meant getting up. And getting into bed, changing into her pajamas, and turning in for the night would have locked her out of more.

And as stupid as it sounded, Reese wasn’t sure that she was *done*.

“Ohhhh gaaawwwddd…”

Kyla had sent her a message at some point. An hour ago? Maybe two? She hadn’t bothered to check it. Lately, whenever she got in the zone, it was hard for her to focus. She’d just eat and eat until it felt like she couldn’t anymore before eventually coming to and realizing that time had passed. And the more stressed she felt, the longer these little auto-pilot sessions could get.

“It’s fuckin’ midnight…” she huffed and rasped to herself as she stared at her phone, 23 notifications deep into a night disassociating into the contents of her kitchen fridge, “I… hahh… I gotta… *oogh*…”

Getting up was not something that she was going to be able to do. Not easily, at least. No matter how mad she was at her aunt, and no matter how good it might have felt for her to continue this senseless binging, she still had class in the morning. The last thing that she needed was to skip—especially if she wanted Aunt See to get off her ass.

But at the same time, actually getting off her ass was going to be harder than ever…

Back when she was a social worker, Serena often told her clients (or sometimes, the children of clients) that success looked a little different to everybody.

For some people, success was in the little things. Not having to worry about where your next bill payment was coming from. Success could be two weeks without getting into a fight at home or in school. Sometimes success could be just as simple as being brave enough to take the first step towards whatever it is you want in life.

But no matter what you define as “success”, it always comes with a price.

Sometimes it’s small, sometimes it’s huge. And sometimes, the cost of that success can be so high that it makes you second guess yourself—it’ll make you think “do I really want this?”

“Reese are you even *there*?”

Up until fairly recently, Serena had been sure that it was all worth it. The late nights, cracking down on her niece, all of the upgrades and cosmetic changes that she had been putting into the store and into their lives, it was her golden ticket to making her dreams come true. Her bank account was fat, her belly was full, and there was enough padding in her budget that she wouldn’t have to worry about where that next paycheck was coming from for the rest of her life, assuming that things kept moving upward.

“C’mon… answer me.”

But now that she was making enough money that she didn’t have to be out on the floor, now that she could hire other people to take care of the store outside of her office… now that she had time to *think* about the direction her life was going…

The sound of her niece’s voice over the phone made her heart skip a beat, only for it to fall when she realized that it was just her voicemail’s outgoing message. After the tone, Serena picked her voice up.

“Hey Ree, I just wanted to chat. You’re probably in class, but…”

Serena paused for a moment, unable to find the words that really conveyed what she wanted to say. What she felt like she *needed* to say. This used to be a lot easier, back when she was the one behind the desk. She always felt like she at least had an *idea* of what to say if someone involved in an especially heavy case needed some advice.

“Just call me when you can, okay? I figure since we’re both not at the store as often, we could… y’know, spend some time together like we used to.”

Used to, she felt like she was at least saying the right things. But the longer that this went on and the more that she and Reese drifted apart from one another, the more that she had begun to question whether any of this was working.

“Love you.”

The longer that this went on, the more that she and Reese drifted apart, the more that Serena had begun to question whether any of her newfound success was worth it.

“You’re not gonna get that?”

“Mmmph… nah…” Reese’s answer was low, almost under her breath as she reached across the library table for her laptop, “I’ll get her later.”

“You uh… you know we’re not supposed to have food up here, right?”

“What? Are we gonna get in trouble?” Reese scoffed, “It ain’t a big deal, I do this kind of thing all the time.”

When Reese put it that way, Kyla could believe it. It felt like every time that she saw her girlfriend lately she was eating something. Or had just eaten something. Or they were on their way to go eat something. Granted, it had been some time since either of them had seen the court. Between college and navigating the ins and outs of having a real-life girlfriend, not to mention their employment situations, finding the time to do much of anything besides sit and eat was an uphill battle on both sides.

That being said, Kyla seemed to be doing much better on the nutritional front than her girlfriend was.

“You still got Oreos in your bag?”

And it was starting to bother her.

Kyla had met Reese a hot minute ago, and the attraction had been instant. They liked the same things, they could serve up snark just as well as they could take it, and they were both (for lack of a better term) getting comfortable with the idea of being out and dating other women around the same time. It was a fun time all around, but the more that this whole thing kept going on and the more that both of them had changed in the two years that they had been dating, the more that Kyla found herself asking…

“*borp…* oh shit that librarian didn’t hear me, right?”

Was this worth it?

“nah, you’re good Ree.” Kyla laughed softly, keeping her voice at a conscious whisper, “Hey, uh… after we finish up here, what do you say that we hit the court? It’s been a while.”

The fleshy brown pillow that pressed out and against Reese’s top at all angles agreed with Kyla’s assessment. It *had* been a while. Not just since the court, but since Reese had seen her toes. As she filled out in every direction over the course of their time together at college, Reese had steadily become less concerned with the things that initially drew Kyla to her in the first place, and had become consumed with… well, consuming.

Whenever she was angry or upset or nervous, which was *often* given the amount of pressure that her aunt had put her under to keep her academic scholarships, Reese would eat. She would eat and eat and eat until she could barely move sometimes. Kyla had been there, watching her girlfriend beach herself on the couch because she had an argument with Serena or because she was nervous about a test. At first, Kyla thought it was kind of cute! It was like a little quirk she could tease her girlfriend about. And the added curves weren’t anything to sneeze at either. The freshman fifteen had hit Reese in all the right places back in the day…

It was just a shame that her cute girlfriend was *all* curve lately. She’d really let herself go. And it wasn’t that Kyla couldn’t appreciate Reese for who she was on the inside, but lately *that* had started to change too…

“You sure I can’t talk you into it?” Kyla pulled herself away from the blossoming double belly that had inflated itself out from underneath Reese’s round breasts, “Y’know, it *is* where we met…”

“That’s all you had to say ~ It’s Tuesday, right?” Reese’s fat face dimpled at the cheeks, a flash of excitement crossing her face, “We can hit up that pop-up shop that comes by, then. It’s a date.”

Kyla wanted to disagree. But knowing about everything that Reese was going through, she was hard-pressed not to give the poor thing *some* fun when she was away from home…

In the middle of the night, in the empty Sweets by Serena building, a lone figure toddled through the aisle created by the back of house operation. Stainless steel tables met with narrow angles formed by countertops, the black rubber mats on the linoleum floor still managing to click underneath ruby red heels.

“You’re supposed to have three and a half feet of clearance in all openings.” A low voice said to herself as she dragged a taloned finger along the surface of a prep table, “It’s a good thing I’m not a health inspector…”

The silhouette of Serena’s midnight guard would not show up on any of the Blink cameras that she had installed some months back. Neither would her presence in the store alert the alarms that had been renewed with a year-long subscription, despite being set for Arm and Away. The large, toddling shape that flickered with orange embers in the dark of night was there as though she belonged there—as though she was as much a part of Sweets by Serena as were the Sweets and Serena herself.

Who was there to say that she wasn’t?

“This is all coming along nicely.” The woman crinkled her nose, fingering the dough left out to rise on the kitchen counter before suckling at a taloned claw, “Almost ready, but *not quite…*”

The shape that had been adopted, the mere mortal form that Devlin had become enclothed in was more for show than any lapse in judgement on her part. At any given point she could have shed these extra pounds and returned to the lithe, unassuming shape that she had first presented herself to Serena with. But there was something admittedly fun about joining in on the craze now and again.

Sure she didn’t *need* to eat, but getting to pig out once in a while was part of the job.

“In the meantime, I suppose I’ll have to settle for a little snack…”

Devlin wiggled her fingers greedily over the waste that had been left out on Reese’s watch. According to DHEC, the day olds should have been tossed out by now—and even if they weren’t, they shouldn’t have been kept in an open container. It might attract bugs.

“Oh Serena…” Devlin tut-tutted with a cheek full of sweets, frosting dusted over her full lips, “We’ll get you there soon…”

Devlin chuckled to herself as she took out a Homer Simpson Special, glazed and pink (though a little hard), and taking a big, scrumptious bite of the thing.

She could almost hear it squeal in agony as her pearly white teeth sank into its doughy flesh.

“You keep this up—”

Devlin wiped her mouth before placing the half-bitten donut back into the bin, deep red magicks coursing through the rest of the case and slowly threading a vine up the way into the rest of the back of house.

“—You’re not gonna need ol’ Devlin around to push you in the right direction anymore…”