II

For a while, Serena had been able to write it off as a dream.

A trick of the mind—she hadn’t been sleeping well since all of this started going south, and the idea of an oddly lucid dream about her in an office that was also a weird amalgamation of her bedroom and Back of House with a little white lady in a red suit wasn’t that hard for her to convince herself that she believed happened.

Occasionally, she’d sink too deep into that memory. The strange, weeping walls of the warped tile and the melting plaster would come back to her. The feeling of a strange woman sitting behind a desk that she recognized as her own, staring back at her from a seat of power with a glimmer of something awful in her eye…

But once she started making actual money doing what she loved to do, she had been far too preoccupied with celebrating all of that to really care.

“This is the best place in town, how have you been here for a year and I not notice you?”

“I don’t know, but I can say one thing for sure.” Serena said without a hint of irony to her tone, “I’m glad you’re here now.”

Pauline had been a faithful customer for a few weeks now. And she was just one of many! She stopped by every day after she got done teaching at the college, ordered two blueberry scones and a coffee, and sat down to work at a booth for an hour or two grading papers. Lately she’d started grabbing a coffee to go on the way out too!

Or like Allison, who worked at the bar up the street? She’d come in looking to see if anyone had any ice one day, and then she’s coming in before her shifts! A tight little figure like hers ought not to have been able to pound away that many buy-one, get-one half-off cookies like it had been, but who was Serena to be jealous when she was making profit?

And Cory and Anthony and Lyla and… there were people who were *coming into her store*. Like, at different times of day! And not like, bored old ladies who were killing time before killing more time going shopping at the mall up the way, or homeless people who were phishing for when she threw out “the good stuff”, or people bumming glasses of water.

...okay that last one still happened a lot, but still, now they usually bought something.

“You know what? This one’s on me honey.” Serena said with a smile as she handed Allison her scone free of charge, “You’ve earned it.”

“Wow! Talk about great customer service!” the frumpy college professor gawked, “You know how to keep me coming back, Serena.”

“Here’s hoping!” Serena finger-gunned her way through another transaction with a smile, “Thanks for stopping by!”

This was working. Like, actually making money working. Sweets by Serena had literally never been profitable before—

“Sorry I’m late, See.”

“I ain’t gonna be mad about it—not today.” Serena said with a smile on her face as she wrapped her arms around her niece, “You okay honey? What’s happening, you look rough.”

“I’m fine. Just a little under the weather is all.” Reese smiled back with her fakest smile, “I’m gonna put up my stuff and grab an apron, okay?”

“Okay…” Serena’s lips tugged to one side, “You know I’m here to talk if you need me, right?”

“I cannot talk about this to my aunt, Kyla she’ll fucking kill me.”

At the tender age of nineteen, the amount of girls that Reese had had in her room after telling her aunt that she was gay had been a whopping two. Kyla, and that cute little Chinese-exchange student from her English class. Not because Serena wasn’t okay with it, but because now it just seemed to lame to invite people over to hang out in her childhood bedroom. Kyla lived in a dorm, and Trieu…

Well she had invited Trieu over to actually study, who who gives a shit what she thought.

Either way, Reese had known since she was little that she could talk to her aunt about anything. Good or bad, whether she as in the right or in the wrong, she could talk to Aunt Serena.

But the one thing that she’d been asked to do, keep her grades up so that her aunt had one less thing to worry about, she hadn’t been doing. Mostly because she had started inviting Kyla to her room. Or to go out to go see a movie. Or to get dinner after she got off at the bakery. They had started as study sessions, but those very quickly became much less denotive of how they were spending their time together as a newly coupled pair of co-eds.

If Reese’s English 102 courses had been as interesting to interact with as the inside of Kyla’s mouth, she wouldn’t have missed such an important deadline on her midterm paper.

“Well… just take the penalty then.” Kyla shrugged, “It’s only ten points off your final grade—that’s still a 90, best case scenario.”

“Except I don’t know the first thing about what this bitch expects me to write about. And if I don’t turn it in by tomorrow, it’s another 10 points off!”

“How much do you have to write?”

“...10 pages.”

“Does that—”

“No it does not include the works cited page.” Reese groaned, “Ughhh… sorry we’ve gotta actually study on our dates again. You’re so lucky you don’t have to take 102.”

“Am I though?” Kyla made a face, “There’re like no cute girls in my CompSci classes.”

“There better not be.” Reese fish hooked an eyebrow playfully, “Last thing I need to worry about it you getting any ideas.”

The two of them tittered in their play fight. Still deep in puppy love, the two girls were as inseparable as their work and school lives would let them be. Giving Reese rides home from class was the bare minimum these days; and it appeared that for the first time in quite some time that it was going to be the extent of their time together tonight. The longer that the two of them were in college together, really the longer that they were *dating* one another, the more common that these sorts of night had become. Rather than going out to the court or making tracks through the neighborhood, their days and occasional nights together had become increasingly indoor-oriented. Going to the library, eating lunch at the on-campus cafeteria, or sometimes just hanging out in an empty classroom or common area together.

And Kyla would have been lying to herself if she said that she didn’t feel a certain amount of softness creeping up onto her girlfriend’s slim, trim physique.

The Freshman 15 was a real thing—her cousin blew up like a life raft over the course of her five and a half years, Kyla got a first-hand look for herself. And while she didn’t exactly want to make a fuss about this…

“You want me to sneak you some dinner?” she offered helpfully after they’d broken apart, “It’s still my turn to pay anyway.”

“Nah, I’ve got plenty to snack on ‘round here.” Reese gestured vaguely into the kitchen down the hall, a subtle softness spreading her top that much more taut, “Get me next time?”

“Sure.” Kyla smiled weakly, giving her girlfriend another kiss, “Good luck, babe.”

“Thanks.” Reese exhaled tiredly, “I’m gonna need it.”

Kyla pushed any thoughts of Reese’s weight gain out of her mind. She was going through it—with her aunt’s big job change and the fact that it was only just now starting to bring in money…

The girl worked at a bakery. Was she really going to rake her across the coals for a few extra pounds?

“Success suits you, honey.”

Serena wished that she didn’t feel so tickled by the label. Being called “successful” wasn’t something that she was particularly used to—after a year of struggling to keep her business afloat and having to dip into her savings, not to mention Reese’s college fund, she hadn’t felt like a success for quite some time. But ever since she had made this arrangement, the money had been all but pouring in! Customers were lining up first thing in the morning, having to get ushered out late at night, and between all of the improvements she’d made to the store and her life with Reese in general, she had *almost* paid back everything that she had borrowed.

“It’s like… I look at you, and I think…” Here Devlin extended a palm, fingers spread as she gestured vaguely into the emptiness of the dining area, “*Wow, it’s like she’s born for this—some people are just built differently*.”

Serena could have said the same thing about her mysterious benefactor, but she didn’t want to ruin a good thing by sticking her foot in her mouth.

When Serena had initially met Devlin—during what she had *thought* was a dream—Devlin had looked different. Not that Serena made it a habit of looking at other women, but Devlin had been pretty! And for the most part, she still was; she had pale skin, short blonde hair that curled down over her shoulders into perfect little ringlets.

“Mm.” Devlin managed through an appreciative bite of cannoli, “See? I haven’t touched the recipe—that’s all you, babe.”

As Devlin opened her mouth to take another bite, the curve of her round face folded into a noticeable double chin. The generous heft that had been piled into one of her ruby-red suit jackets pressed ever so slightly against the back end of the counter, and Devlin’s cheeks dimpled on the side where she hadn’t shoved that heaping helping of cannolo so she could continue their impromptu “meeting”.

“S’agood thing I came along though.” Devlin’s lips gave a little smack as she finished off her bite, “I hate to think about all your natural talent going to waste.”

Serena’s many years in Social Service was the only thing keeping her from making a crack at her natural talent going to *Devlin’s* waist. That and she really didn’t want to upset the woman who was doing *whatever she did* behind the scenes to ensure her business was a success. Serena had spent long enough shooting herself in the foot—letting Devlin get a little doughy without mentioning it was the least that she could do.

Besides, it wasn’t like she was the only one.

“I really appreciate everything it is that you’re doing for me, Devlin.” Serena’s tone was oozing with sincerity and appreciation, albeit with a hint of trepidation ticking the back of her throat, “I just don’t know how to *thank* you—”

“Bah.” Devlin waved dismissively, nibbling on a sugar cookie that she’d plucked from the ones that had been freshly plated in anticipation of an opening shift, “You keep doing what you’re doing, and that’ll be good enough for me.”

It was during moments like these where Serena’s trepidation became more than just a hint or a tickle.

“N-No, I mean it. Like, how do you want me to pay you?” Serena struggled not to say it *too* flatly, her confusion over the matter having slowly ripened into a mild consternation, “You’ve done so much for me these past few months, and I haven’t given you a dime.”

“Do I look like I need dimes?” Devlin smiled contentedly, “I do what I do because I like to do it and I’m good at it. Same as you! Helping others is my passion, and watching you grow and succeed really is all I need to keep doing what I’m doing.”

Serena leaned in, dead serious as she asked her next question;

“Are you some kind of guardian angel or something?”

You would have thought that Serena had told her “case worker” a raunchy joke. The laughter that bounced in Devlin’s full belly was deeper than Serena would have expected; she’d always been jovial, but Devlin seemed particularly tickled by the soft accusation.

“I wouldn’t go *that far,* hon.” Devlin finally said, still chuckling to herself as she uncrinkled her nose, “We can discuss payment when you’re a little deeper into the green. You’ve still got a few loans to pay back, right?”

*Among other things…*

“You’re right.” Serena said with some finality, her best customer service smile spreading between her cheeks, “Why don’t you uh… have a donut for the road? It’s the least I could do, with everything you’ve—”

“Don’t mind if I *do*…” Devlin wiggled her chubby little fingers over the line of delicious delights, snaking a pudgy pointer through the glazed loop and taking a bite, “Sherioushly See—*ulp!*—you wasted your time in Social Services. You’ve got a natural talent for this kind of thing.”

And even if she wasn’t quite sure where she stood on her mysterious Case Worker that she only vaguely remembered meeting, Serena’s smile couldn’t help but turn more genuine as she allowed the compliment to sink in.

Things really *were* turning around for her, weren’t they?

The after-work rush was easily the busiest time of the day at Sweets by Serena.

Mornings, sure. Everyone wanted to get in a cup of coffee and a kruller before heading into the office. That made sense. Lunchtime saw a small boost in the regular lull that had cropped up between 10 and 2, but no other time of day could hope to compare to the peak hours that had grown between 3 and 7.

Kids were getting out of school, second shift jobs were letting out, and people all across the city were getting off at varying points across the hour—and a lot of them wanted nothing more than to sink their teeth into something Sweet by Serena.

So much so that the crowds were starting to blend together.

“Oh hey, Pauline!” Serena did her best to keep up a friendly attitude even in the wake of being caught in such a rush, “Back for a double dose today?”

“Yeah.” The teacher exhaled excitedly as she pressed herself against the counter, “Gotta get my sugar rush if I ever want to be able to grade all of these papers!”

The laughter between them went on for just a little too long, giving Serena ample time to scope out the changes that had cropped up in the figures of one of her best customers. Much like her mysterious case worker, Pauline seemed to enjoy Sweets by Serena plenty. She was in almost every morning, and more and more often she’d been coming in after she got off at the school too. Not that Serena was complaining, of course, but one couldn’t help but to notice some *changes* that came with getting a regular supply of apple-filled donuts and fancy coffee.

Pauline had gained at least fifty pounds since she had become a regular at Sweets by Serena. That wasn’t just Serena being catty—the woman had visibly gained some weight since she had started coming around all the time. Her belly was big and her hips were wide, sandwiched into an A-line skirt that desperately needed to go up another size. Her little tummy had long passed the point of threatening to roll over the waistband, her brown sweater had developed a spare tire between her breasts and the hem of her pants and let it grow something fierce. Meanwhile, her heavy shoulder boulders had begun to droop underneath their own weight, giving Serena some pause every time she struggled to make eye contact with her regular customer.

And she was far from the only one.

“Thanks a bunch, hun!” Pauline waved herself away after she’d pulled her card out of the debit slot, “See you tomorrow!”

Tomorrow. She was gonna have to wake up and do this all again tomorrow.

“Maybe I need some help around here.” Serena said to herself, wiping actual sweat off of her brow as she glanced at the clock, “Where’s Ree? She was supposed to be here an hour ago…”

The truth was, Serena had been thinking about this more and more even before Reese’s tardiness started to directly impact her ability to serve customers in a timely fashion. The demand was simply too high for her to keep going at the rate that she had been, by herself. Even with her updated schedule, Reese should have been done with her classes by now. And the agreement was that, as soon as she could, she was supposed to get to the shop so that she could help out. Her aunt *needed* her! With the way that things were picking up, one person behind the counter just wasn’t enough anymore. The more money that kept pouring in—

*Reese’s College Fund*.

—Serena physically shuddered as that nasty little intrusive thought reared its ugly head for about the tenth time that week. She felt bad about it, but it was the only way that she was going to be able to keep this place afloat. Which, judging by all of the success that she’d been seeing, just so happened to be right call! If she hadn’t skimmed off the top of Reese’s savings account once or twice, Sweets by Serena would have never taken off. Because she never would have met Devlin—

*I did this.*

—she never would have been in the right place at the right time to meet a business partner who helped her turn it all around.

And if Reese kept her grades up, she’d never need it in the first place. Serena had started to get frustrated when Reese started pulling so many hours, but as long as that work was going directly towards her education, Serena couldn’t be mad at her niece—

“Sorry I’m late, Kyla didn’t get out until 3:45 today.”

—but this *Kyla* girl on the other hand…