I

These days, a lot of people have it in their heads that passion and hard work are enough to make any dream come true. With the ability to cultivate what we see and what we do to only pertain to motivational posts that fuel a new brede of financial toxic positivity, it can become a slippery slope.

The fact of the matter is that, if hard work and dedication to her craft (not to mention being pretty damn good at it) were enough to guarantee a successful business, then Serena Nesbitt would have been in the Forbes top 100 long before she had gotten to this point. Most small businesses fail within their first year of operation—the nice woman at the bank had even told her that when she got her loan.

Now all Serena could do is wish that she had listened.

“I think I’m more depressed *now* than when I was a social worker.”

She had learned to say the intrusive thoughts out loud. As a sort of way to “get them out” so she could go about her day. So that she could tend to her failing business and pretend that the end of her dreams of owning a bakery were not coming to a close any time soon. That she and Reese were going to finally be able to move out of that apartment and into one of those nice little houses in the suburbs, and that by this time next year she was going to open up branches in North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee…

Fuck, why not the whole damn country? Anything was possible in the land of make-believe.

But that’s where those opportunities were going to stay. At least, short of God himself coming down and advertising that everyone should come on down to Serena’s Sweets, located in Downtown between the Starbucks and the Mattress store.

“Jesus fucking Christ.”

Well, he certainly wasn’t going to do that if Serena kept blaspheming, *that* she remained confident about.

The sound of the chime over the door snapped the manager, owner, and founder of Sweets By Serena back into her best Social Worker voice. Same principle as back when she was behind a desk—we want to be positive, we want to *smile*, and we want everyone to leave this place thinking that they’re *special*.

“Welcome to Sweets by Serena, what can I help you—” her expression fell flat when she actually *looked* at who was walking through the door, “—Oh. Hey Ree.”

“Damn, it’s good to see you too SeeSee.” Reese snorted, “I’m not in trouble because I was late, am I?”

“No, it’s… it’s fine.” It’s not like she needed the extra set of hands anyway, “But don’t rat yourself out next time.”

“Dang.” Reese snapped and pumped her arm, “Let me put my stuff down and I’ll grab an apron.”

“’Kay.” Serena trailed off, trying to hide just how *miserable* she felt, “Don’t leave your backpack here again, the alarm company tells me when you come back to get it.”

“I can’t get away with nuthin’.”

Serena smiled a little as she heard Reese walk away. Her niece was a good kid—she’d been proud to take her in after all that stuff with her mom went down. Her sister might not have been able to take care of her, but under Serena’s care that skinny little wallflower had thrived into becoming a loud, boisterous little brat that was halfway done with her freshman year at college. A place that she *never* would have gotten to if Diane was still taking care of her, that much Serena was sure.

And somehow growing a business was *more* difficult than being a single mom—what the actual fuck, right?

“Busy morning?” Reese asked, stepping behind the counter as she tied her apron behind her back, “I saw that the bake case was empty when I came in.”

“…yeah. Busy morning.” Serena nodded approvingly of the alibi she’d been provided with, “What about you? Busy afternoon? That’s the third time you’ve been late this week, hun.”

“Yeah no, me and Kyla were just talkin’.”

“Talking or *talking* talking?” Serena piqued an eyebrow, shifting slightly from Work Aunt to Fun Aunt as she tried to get her niece onto a new topic, “Kyla was the reason you were late last time too. And the time before that and the time before *that*—”

“Hey, that time my professor asked me to stay after.”

“—you’re crushin’ on your professor too.” Serena chuckled, “I feel *better* about you flirting with Kyla than I do about you flirting with a woman twice your age.”

“Gawddddd we aren’t *flirting*.” Reese shifted uncomfortably as she fought back a smile, “We’re just talkin’ like we always are. We’re… *friends*.”

“Uh-huh.” Serena hip-checked her niece as she grabbed a new pair of gloves, “Well I guess if you can be *friends* with anyone I’m glad it’s her.”

“SeeSee *stoppp*!”

It was a lot easier to not let Reese in on what was happening with the Bakery. The last thing that she needed to worry about what was going to happen to her aunt’s dream project. She could always get back into social work—it wasn’t like her fifteen years of experience had gone anywhere. But going bankrupt was going to hit them both pretty hard. Which was why Reese needed to worry about keeping her grades up and not cute little Jewish girls that lived up the street.

The truth was, Serena would have done anything if it meant not having to admit that this wasn’t working. She had dreamt of owning her own bakery ever since she was a little girl—she and Diane had talked about opening up shop together before her life went down the drain, and now that it was all up to Serena that dream was going right into the toilet.

But if it meant keeping her niece happy, then she could shoulder the need for them to have a Big Talk until a little later down the line.

Living with herself and sleeping on it were entirely different things though.

Before all this mess with the banks and her business going under, Serena had always slept like a rock. Even during her busiest weeks Serena would conk out at the end of a hard day at the office and not shift once in transit from night to morning. She’d been having a lot of trouble getting there, too. The over-the-counter stuff had become a necessity in getting her to stop thinking about all the big, scary numbers that were amounting up in her life.

And sometimes she had some pretty strange dreams.

But they never felt this *clear* before.

Sure, she’d done some of that experimental stuff back when she was in college. Meditation and yoga and all that jazz. But even back when she had convinced herself that she could lucid dream, Serena had never felt so *awake* during one of her sessions. She was actively picking up her feet and consciously controlling her hands, looking around a foggy cloudscape. One that felt an awful lot like the building they’d put her bakery in, completed with a familiar subconscious smell of baking dough and liquid sugar.

“H*iii* it’s nice to meet you—I’m the agent whose been assigned to your case.”

Serena wasn’t quite sure *why* her subconscious had conjured up this woman in particular.

“Have a seat, I was just going over your file.”

The surrounding area shifted slightly. Becoming a mixture of the back of house at her bakery and her old office back from when she was a social worker. Except this time she was on the other side of the desk, staring up at the three framed diplomas and office décor that were all supposed to make clients feel like their cases were being handled with care. Her little name placard had been swapped out for one that read ‘Devlin’, and the little white woman sitting behind the counter desk was definitely *not* Serena.

“I, uh…”

Serena was just so *bothered* by it all. The uncanniness of her surroundings contrasted perfectly with the clarity she could understand the woman in front of her. She was short, with a pale skin and curly blonde hair. And dressed in red, too. ‘Devlin’ wore a little red blazer and a strawberry-patterned pink and white blouse underneath it. Serena could see an a-line skirt over hose that lead down to long red heels that matched the shade of her lipstick.

“Hi?”

“H*iii*!” she greeted Serena again with a little wave that came off as a smidge overenthusiastic and just short of patronizing, “Sit sit sit. We’ve got a *lot* of ground to cover if we want to discuss the options you’re coming in with today.”

Serena didn’t remember grabbing for a chair. She didn’t remember seeing one, for that matter. But her unconscious body shifted to a seated position at just over eye-level with the woman who had hijacked her desk.

“Options?” Serena looked around in disbelief, “Options for *what*?”

“For what we’re going to do about your *bakery*, silly!”

‘Devlin’ reached underneath the desk, the sound of a creaky metal drawer opening before her arm returned with a large manilla file folder—printed across the top, in embossed black and white on a printed label, read…

NESBIT, SWEETS BY SERENA.

The small woman’s hands snaked underneath the top of her folder, popping it open like a car hood before leafing through its contents. The dream-like quality of her surroundings were not lost on the papers themselves; Serena couldn’t really make out any of the *words* that were printed on the contents of what was (apparently) her file, but she did recognize a few things. Pictures of the inside, a graph that showed the store’s continued downward trajectory, as well as headshots of both her and her niece paper-clipped to the packet of papers inside.

“Where did you get those?”

“Re*lax* they’re *just* your Facebook profile pictures.” Devlin waved dismissively, “Well, Reese’s is from Instagram. You should really get with the times—Facebook’s dead, honey. No *wonder* you’ve been having difficulties if *that’s* where you’ve been doing most of your marketing.”

Serena was more dumbfounded than offended at the assertion. All of this was just so bizarre that there wasn’t much she could do *but* be dumbfounded. Everything around her felt so *real*, and for as melty and unfocused as her surroundings looked, she could *see* and *feel* their abstractness. They had weight and presence, which contrasted so uncomfortably with the figure behind the desk. Devlin turned the file over to Serena to peruse at her leisure, but it was all just so much to take in…

“The long and short of it all is that I am here to help *you* get Serena’s Sweets back in the green.”

“That’s, uhh…” was that an h or a q—either way, the chart didn’t look *good*, “Sweets by Serena.”

“Right! What did I say?” Devlin leaned forward, elbows planted firmly on the surface of the desk as she smiled intently at the stumbling business owner, “It doesn’t really *matter;* because your bakery could be named Joe’s Slop Shop and I could turn it into a success. I’ve been at this for longer than you’ve been *alive*, and I’ve picked up every trick in the book that goes into taking a tanking business to a—”

“I’m… I’m dreaming, right?” Serena scowled, “Like… I’m gonna wake up back in my apartment, the walls won’t be all…”

She gestured vaguely at the Dali-esque architecture.

“Right?”

“Of course! You can wake up any time you want.” Devlin shrugged her shoulders, “But if I were you, I’d hear me out first.”

“…are you gonna *tell* me how to wake up, orrr…?”

“After you hear me out first.” Devlin winked, “After all, if you’re good at something, you *never* give it away for free…”

Serena knew those words well. They were what had propelled her into her current predicament in the first place. What she had thought to herself plenty of times when she had been roped into making sweets and cakes for God knows how many birthdays, family get-togethers, and weddings. People had been telling her for years that she should open up a bakery and leave her boring, depressing desk work behind her. And she had listened to them! And where had that gotten her?

Lucid dreaming about a reverse shark tank where she was getting eyed up like she was chum.

“I’ve been watching you for a while now. You’re smart with your money, careful with your planning, and more importantly, you’re *proud* of what you do.” Devlin said with a flouncy little inflection, “Sometimes heart and soul just aren’t enough to make a business *work!* It’s not just about drive; you’ve got to know the right people, say the right things to them, and more importantly, be in the right place at the right time if you ever want to get anywhere—and doesn’t all that sound exhausting?”

Serena had to admit, this hallucination knew her stuff. Devlin, or whatever her name was, had laid it out flat on the table for her. No one else had really sat her down to voice the thoughts she’d been too afraid to tell herself since the ship started going under. And while it made Serena uneasy, sure, it made her lean in all the same. She’d been hooked by the approach, the vague promise of a solution to her money problems.

“It does.” Serena corrected herself, “It *is*, I mean. I just don’t know what I’m doing *wrong*, y’know? I’m marketing, I’m getting my face out there, I—”

“Yeah, yeah, all that’s *really* good.” Devlin cut her off, “But you haven’t really made a *mistake* yet. Like you said, you’re doing all the right things, you’re saying all the right stuff… you just haven’t made the right *connections* yet.”

Here, Devlin pointed her perfectly painted and manicured nails (French tip, white on red) in referral to herself.

“But now you *have*.” She said with an excitable little shimmy, “And li’l ol’ Devlin Screwtape is here to make all your bakery blues turn into a nice, green *profit*.”

“You uh… you’ve got a real Used Car Salesman energy about you right now.”

“…is it working?”

“Kinda.” Serena smiled, “So, uh… what do I have to do?”

“Y’know, that’s literally the best part about all of this—you only have to do exactly what you’ve been doing, in the exact same way.” Devlin clapped her hands together and pointed them towards Serena, “I’ll handle the *heavy lifting* that’ll get the butts in the chairs.”

“What so you’re like a… social media manager or something?” Serena asked excitedly, feeling the butterflies in her stomach for the first time since her sign went up against the brick and mortar, “Because I’ve had a *really* fun idea for a TikTok challenge that we could—”

“That’s, uh… that’s not really what I’m talking about here.” Devlin chuckled, placing her hands firmly on the table in front of her before closing Serena’s file, “Without going into the nitty-gritty details, all you need to know is that *if you accept*, then you are literally guaranteed success.”

Devlin counted off on her last three fingers, from middle to pinky;

“No more late bills, no more late nights, and no more bounced checks.”

There was a calm between them as Devlin’s words hung in the air. Serena wasn’t stupid—anything that promised something for nothing was too good to be true. And if she were being honest with herself, contracts and promises of success were what had gotten her into this mess in the first place. That and her own pride.

She literally couldn’t afford to make another big mistake.

“What do I have to do?” Serena asked with pursed lips, arms folded defensively over the little tummy that she’d developed from stress-snacking on her own supply, “Other than just ‘say yes’ or whatever flashy buzzwords you’re gonna throw at me.”

“Is ‘just say yes’ not enough?” Devlin cocked a little blonde eyebrow, leaning in to rest her chin onto her palm, “Honestly sweetie, I don’t really want anything. Not from *you*, anyway.”

“…okay, so you emphasized *you*, and that’s kind of making me nervous.”

“Let’s just say that *you* doing *your* job and making all kinds of yummy treats aligns really well with *my* job and what *I’m* expected to do while I’m on the clock.” Devlin scrunched her nose as she smiled up at Serena from her big comfy chair, “So I have a vested interest in making sure that Serena’s Sweets—”

“Sweets by Serena.”

“—Whatever, I have a *vested interest* in making sure that *you* are successful.”

Here, Devlin extended her free arm towards Serena, primed for a shake. The older woman could only look at it, tipped white and stained blood red as it hung sharply, extended just inches away from her heart.

“What do you have to lose, right?” Devlin’s deep plum lipstick parted into a pearly white smile, “Except for your car, your apartment, *Reese’s college fund…*”

Serena gulped, feeling a catch in her throat at the call-out. She hadn’t told anyone that that had been where she’d been scraping off the top from to keep things afloat. She had sworn to herself that she’d pay it back, but if her niece would just *pay attention in school* then she wouldn’t need it, right? And she could keep the business afloat until it kicked off!

Except it hadn’t kicked off.

And it looked like it wasn’t going to kick off.

And the gap between what was there and what Serena had taken was just getting bigger and bigger these days…

“I don’t have to do *anything*? Serena asked flatly, taking Devlin’s extended hand in her own, “You’ll do you, and I’ll do me?”

“Just say the word…” Devlin’s expression shifted ever so slightly into the abstract, “Partner.”