Moving back home had been the last thing that Mackenzie Hollifield, now Mackenzie Fogle for the *second* time in her life, had wanted to do.

You would have thought that the judge would have taken pity on her—a poor momma, workin’ as a waitress in podunk Boiling Springs, who was cheated on by her no-good rotten husband at just barely twenty four—but at the end of the day, the house that she and Ryan had lived in for the past five years was just up and gone.

It wasn’t like she *needed* the extra room, but the thought of him and that tramp foolin’ around in their bedroom was enough to make her blood boil.

“How in *the hell* did I ever sleep on a twin-sized mattress?”

Life after high school had brought a lot of changes in Mackenzie. Not just in the form of her daughter Tiffany, but also in an abdication of the strict track athlete’s physique that had helped to keep her slim, trim, and in running shape during her time as a Boiling Springs Bulldog. After she’d gone and gotten pregnant, she couldn’t exactly make time to jog around the neighborhood while she was raisin’ a child. And then, y’know, everyone puts on some comfort weight when they get married… especially once he started to make jokes about her size—she was a comfort eater, okay? Was it *really* her fault that she’d blown up so much after high school?

No! That was…

Genetics! It was genetics’ fault! A-And her mama and Aunt Sharon’s for not teachin’ her how to cook better food. Maybe a little bit of Tiffy’s too, on account’a how much weight Mack put on when she was pregnant… what kind of child makes her mama crave spaghetti with gravy morning noon and night?!

In more ways than one, Mackenzie Hollifield was returning to a room that she had outgrown. From the pictures of her and her friends on the dresser to the uniform on the wall to the very furniture that she used to plop down on after an especially long track meet, the Mackenzie that was coming home again was far from the one who had left straight out of high school…

“Mackenzie, supper’s ready!”

…but for every change that seemed to face her around every corner, her mama’s cookin’ was just the same as it had always been.

How Mackenzie hadn’t blown up before she met Ryan was a mystery. She’d always had an appetite on her, it was just track and going out with her youth group back in high school that kept her skinny. Now that it had all caught up with her, she was, in no uncertain terms, a hefty four-hundred-pound heifer. Her face had gotten so round, swaddled in a thick ring of chin that fused into chunky dimpled cheeks. Her legs thick as tires and her arms heavy and flabby. And that stomach of hers… she could hardly believe how that somewhere *deep* underneath that belly of hers there used to be a flat little runner’s tummy! These days it entered her bedroom a full step or two before she did, sloshing thickly with her every labored step, was it any wonder why she was always out of breath? She was getting huge, and this divorce combined with havin’ to move back in with her mama hadn’t done any favors for her weight problem!

She had come to terms with the fact that she wasn’t a slim runner anymore—given the hell that Ryan gave her about letting herself go, and the sheer size of her these days, denial just simply wasn’t an option for her. But coming back to her old bedroom had made it hard to forget just *how much* weight she’d gained since leaving graduating high school five years ago.

“Mackie baby, you hear? Supper’s ready!”

“I’m comin’ momma!” Mackenzie huffed and puffed as she pushed herself off of the bed, “Just… gimme a minute!”

Mackenzie lumbered out into the kitchen, floorboards creaking throughout the old country house until she reached the dining room, where her mama and daddy had yet another spread of southern comfort food that they’d been treating their daughter to since she’d moved back home. To say both of them were big people was something of an understatement—her momma was frequently guilty of smuggling snacks away in her purse for the occasional moment of boredom, and her daddy was just as fond of his beer as his wife was of his beer belly—but neither of them were nearly as large as their daughter had become since moving back home.

“There she is!” her momma greeted her warmly as she plopped a heaping helping of homemade mashed potatoes on her daughter’s plate, “I was just about to come an’ get you!”

“Lemme pull out a chair for ya.” Her daddy’s gut pressed against the spindles of the wide bench seat set for her at the dinner table, “Therrrrre ya go.”

Mackenzie sighed as she sank into the chair, feeling a wave of comfort wash over her. Her mama and daddy hadn’t changed much since she moved away—they still made all the same southern classics that they used to—but it was still nice to have them around when things got tough.

She looked down at her plate, groaning with pleasure as soon as she saw what was on it: fish filets breaded in cornmeal and fried up golden crisp, hushpuppies with just a hint of sweetness from their secret batter recipe, buttery mashed potatoes that melted on your tongue…

Mackenzie smiled and thanked them both, before taking a seat. The fabric of her dress stretched tautly across her stomach as she did so, the elasticity of it slowly giving way after years of wear and tear.

“So what’s been goin’ on with you today? Anything new happenin’ at Fish Camp? You start anythin’ yet? I heard they took on some new cooks… ”

The conversation quickly faded away into the background as Mackenzie began to chow down—a habit that was quickly becoming second nature to her since moving back home with Mom and Dad. All of her emotions came out in food these days; whether it be happiness for seeing Tiffany on weekends or sadness about Ryan leaving—it all demanded fuel, and Mackenzie wasn't one to deny herself a good meal when she needed one!

It didn't take long for heaping platefuls of fried fish, hushpuppies, coleslaw, fries, gravy-drenched mashed potatoes (her mama had always known how much she loved those) to disappear off the table until there was nothing left but crumbs. Before either parent could get up from their chairs though…Mackenzie was already snatching up seconds!

It had been almost five months since Ryan had cheated on her with his skinny little redhead secretary and a full two months since she’d moved back in with her parents. And every emotion good or bad that came along since then demanded food; for every longing for companionship there seemed to be another helping of macaroni and cheese waiting for her in the refrigerator, just as sure as picking up Tiffany from Ryan’s house meant a stop at McDonalds for a large McFlurry and two Happy Meals (one for Tiffany too, naturally!)

Mackenzie knew that if this kept up her weight wouldn’t go anywhere. It was only a matter of time before that old bed of hers broke down under her, and it wasn’t like she was getting any matches on Bumble…

But right now? Right here?

All Mackenzie wanted to do was enjoy herself.

And there was nothing that Mackenzie enjoyed more than thirds at a good old-fashioned southern supper.

In more ways than one, Mackenzie Hollifield and Tara West were like two peas in a pod.

Not just as far as their shared love of greasy southern comfort food was concerned, but also in the sense that neither of them were exactly where they thought that they would have been even just a few years ago.

Whereas Mackenzie’s crucible had been her divorce, Tara had moved back home with her mother and sister Haley two years ago, leaving behind a successful career in Charleston. But thanks to her mother’s coddling nature and Haley’s bad habits, she quickly gained weight during her stay. Despite the five-year age gap between them, they’d been fast friends once Tara started working at the Fish Camp with her. Even now, despite being technically Mackenzie's boss, Tara may as well have been like a big sister to Mackenzie; something that the double-wide divorcee desperately needed after her split from Ryan.

They were kindred spirits—two tubby gals trying to make the best out of being stuck in their hometown.

“I wanna make it very clear.” Tara gulped, “This is *very much* a one time thing.”

She popped another hushpuppy into her mouth, taking a sip from her Sprite.

“If Iris finds out that we didn’t log all this waste, it’s my ass.”

“I didn’t realize that much was on the line.”

“I *know* you didn’t just make a crack about my weight.”

Naturally brunette but dyed blonde, most of the pounds that Tara had put on since moving back home had settled around around her hips, ass, tummy and face—her big nose making it all too obvious when people compared the “before” Tara to the current version. Dressed in a Fish Camp t-shirt that was just a little too small around the waist and a zip-up hoodie, the extra insulation that Tara had grown over the course of her extended stay at home made her look well-suited for the chilly environment of the dark, powerless Fish Camp.

Mackenzie, of course, had changed the most out of the two of them.

Whereas Tara’s silhouette was still mostly recognizable to anyone who'd ever known her before she moved home—just bigger—Mackenzie seemed like a completely different person. Her cheeks were round and pudgy from all the junk food that she ate to cope with Ryan leaving her for another woman, while her arms and legs were as thick around as tree trunks thanks to all the weight gain over the past five years since high school. And then there was that infamous stomach of hers… Mackenzie could hardly believe how much it stuck out these days! It seemed like every time she got up in the morning it bulged just a little bit more than it had yesterday.

But despite their differences, they both shared an appreciation for greasy southern fish and hushpuppies; not only did they work at Fish Camp together but also spent many Friday nights after work holed up in its dimly lit dining room snacking on whatever leftovers remained after closing time.

It wasn’t until one particularly snowy night when they found themselves snowed in at Fish Camp that their snack sessions hit an entirely new level though.

The snow started falling early in the evening, quickly accumulating into several inches by nightfall—enough that neither Mackenzie nor Tara felt comfortable driving home through such hazardous conditions any longer (Four inches was a *lot* in South Carolina, okay?!)

So what else were two tubby gals without anywhere else to go supposed to do? Obviously: snack their way through this especially heavy snowfall!

With no customers and only Tara present due to weather-related closings, Mackenzie and Tara decided that now would be a good time for some private indulgence—and indulge they did! After all, it would have been a shame to waste all of this perfectly good food, right? The cooks had been sent home and so had all of the other waitresses. The snowfall was too thick for anyone to come and get them, and until it died down…

Well, let’s just say that the prodigiously pudgy pair made quick work of everything from deep fried pickles with ranch dressing to specialty onion rings with spicy honey mustard dip until nothing remained except crumbs littered across tables throughout Fish Camp's dark interior... twice over!

The Fish Camp wouldn’t open for another two days until after the snow fell. Tara and Mackenzie both long gone, bundled up in bed, picking their teeth from many meals past after they’d been picked up by Mackenzie’s daddy. Even those crumbs had been swept away beneath layers of freshly fallen powder outside—all evidence pointing towards something far more sinister than what really happened that night: namely two chubby best friends stuffing themselves silly on southern comfort food during a blizzard meant for hibernation rather than going out into town looking for trouble.

After all, if Tara said that they wasted all of that product, then Iris didn’t have any reason *not* to believe her…

The last few hours of Christmas Eve were a blur for Mackenzie. After stuffing her face to the brim with supper, she had quickly retired back to her bedroom and plopped down on the bed for what felt like an eternity.

By then it was almost midnight and Mackenzie knew just where she wanted go—the kitchen! Her mouth began watering at the thought of all of those cookies that she, her momma, and Tiff had made earlier that day for “Santa” (but really they were just as much—if not more—for themselves). She could practically feel them melting against her tongue, her eyes lighting up as she thought of the *mountains* of cookies that her momma and Tiffany had baked for “Santa”.

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Mackenzie's eyes sparkled as she surveyed the kitchen before her. The aroma of freshly-baked cookies and other treats still filled the air, making her huge stomach gurgle with anticipation. Christmas Eve was always a special time for Mackenzie, and being back in her childhood home had allowed her to spend it with family once again—and indulge in a little tradition that she’d been partaking in *far* before it had ever become a problem.

Even skinny little track star Mackenzie hadn’t been able to keep herself from pilfering perfectly good cookies that had been left out on a plate!

She was very much a different sort of cookie snatcher these days. Four hundred pounds of heifer lumbering hungrily into the kitchen for a midnight snack, her new red pajamas clinging tightly to a frame that would almost certainly outgrow them early into the new year. Mackenzie had been devastated that she’d put on enough weight to make her new pajamas tight before her momma had even given them to her earlier that night—but sometimes you just needed something sweet after going through so much this year!

With a sly grin, Mackenzie lumbered hungrily into the kitchen. The floorboards creaked beneath her weight with every heavy footfall, but it was worth it just to be near those delicious treats. Without another thought, Mackenzie began plucking cookies off the cooling rack and stuffing them into her mouth. It didn’t matter if she was already full up from dinner because these treats demanded attention now!

Besides… what kind of Santa would be mad about getting a little extra?

"Come to mama…"

She purred the words huskily as she grabbed a greedy fistful of cookies from the plate on the counter. Her breathing was heavy and wanting as she stared down the first of what promised to be many morsels. She wasted no time in stuffing the first of them her mouth, savoring their sweet flavor exploding against her taste buds like fireworks, eyelids fluttering blissfully as she moaned softly to the otherwise empty room…

"...Santa?"

Mackenzie froze mid-chew, eyes wide in shock as she heard the soft whisper coming from behind her. She quickly turned around to see who could possibly be awake at this hour—only to find Tiffany standing there with a look of wonder and awe on her face!

"Tiffy!" Mackenzie nearly choked on her cookie, bracing herself on the kitchen counter so that she didn’t fall over backwards, cheeks turning an embarrassed red. "What are you doin' up so late?"

She tried to hide the remaining cookies behind her back but it was too little too late—Tiffany had already seen them!

For a few moments neither one said anything, both just staring at each other in surprise before Tiffany broke the silence:

“Mommy, those are s’posed to be for Santa!”

Mackenzie chuckled nervously, a hand coming up to rub the back of her neck as she tried to come up with an excuse. “I… uh… was just checkin’ on them! For Santa! Y’know, see if they were alright and everything?”

She gave Tiffany a sheepish grin, but it only seemed to make things worse—Tiffany crossed her arms over her chest in disapproval before countering:

"But they’re s’*posed* to be for *Santa*."

"I know honey, I just… got a little carried away." She smiled sheepishly, finally putting down the remaining cookies and pushing them back onto the plate. "It's Christmas Eve—what kind of Santa would be mad about Mommy getting a few extra goodies?"

Mackenzie winked as she said this, giving her daughter's shoulder an affectionate squeeze with her free hand.

“You get lotsa treats all year roun’.” Tiffany poked her momma in the undercarriage of her tummy as it drooped over her knees, “Santa only gets one day!”

“You little—” Mackenzie caught herself from snapping at Tiffany’s offhanded remark about her weight, blowing out a cool stream of air as she felt her face grow pink and hot with even further embarrassment to be heaped upon this moment that would (hopefully) be long forgotten by the time little Tiffy woke up and got to open a few presents, “—sleepyhead! Don’t you know you gotta go to bed so Santa can come?”

Mackenzie was far too out of shape to bend over and pick up her daughter. Her best bet at corralling her to bed was to try and appeal to that childlike sense of wonder that had brought her out of her bedroom to investigate those footsteps anyway…

And then maybe she’d get to be alone with those cookies.

“Okay munchkin, it’s time for bed!” Mackenzie whispered hoarsely as she clapped her hands together softly, her arms wobbling with the sudden motion, “Santa won’t come if you’re not asleep honey!”

***“SANTA’S NOT GONNA COME IF YOU EAT ALL THE COOKIES, MOMMY.”***