Swapping a Broken Heart for a New Start

Chapter 17

Earlier that evening, just as everyone was getting off work and gathering to head out for dinner together, they happened to bump into Sandra Taylor, who was about to leave.

When she heard they were going out for a group dinner, Sandra immediately chimed in, all smiles and enthusiasm, asking if she could join.

“She insisted on picking up the check, and the boss was there too, planning to come along. We really couldn’t say no...” Nancy James explained quickly, her tone anxious as she looked at Camila Davis. “But Camila, please believe us—we made it clear it was your farewell dinner. No one ever called it a ‘welcome party’ or anything like that...”

Camila’s face was clouded, and she didn’t answer right away.

She knew deep down that none of this was really her friends’ fault. They meant well. No one could have guessed Sandra would bulldoze her way in like this.

But that woman—she’d done it on purpose. No question.

The atmosphere in the private dining room was suddenly tense. But Sandra, perfectly oblivious—or pretending to be—just glided in, pulling Jordan Smith along, and took two seats right beside him. On purpose, she’d put herself between Camila and Jordan.

Then, with a gentle, practiced smile, she turned to the group. “Has everyone decided what to order yet?”

“Uh... not yet...” some of the others replied, awkward laughter filling the silence.

Sandra nodded graciously. “How about I help pick for everyone? Hope you don’t mind.”

With the boss, Jordan Smith, right there, who would dare object?

Sandra clearly knew it too, but still made a show of explaining, “I practically lived at this place in high school—I used to come here all the time with Jordan. I know what’s good. You all have to try their signature dishes.”

Without waiting for any response, she swiftly began ordering for the table.

She even leaned in toward Jordan, her tone just a bit too familiar. “Your tastes haven’t changed, right? I got you the same things you always used to order. Hope you still like them.”

Jordan's expression softened, his eyes lighting up ever so slightly. "Yeah," he replied gently, "I do."

Sandra let out a playful little laugh.

Their exchange didn't go unnoticed. Everyone at the table saw it, and a few people exchanged knowing glances. The rumors were true, it seemed—the boss had a soft spot for this new director.

Some folks were clearly re-evaluating Sandra's status in their minds.

As for Camila, the whole scene left her weary and more than a little queasy. She lost any appetite she'd had for her own going-away dinner.

She considered just getting up and leaving—she couldn't stand being in that room any longer.

But as she started to rise, Nancy James quickly handed her another menu, concern in her voice. "Camila, I remember you love grilled salmon and baby back ribs. Should I order those for you?"

That snapped everyone's attention back to Camila.

After all, this dinner was supposed to be about her.

The rest of the group echoed, "Definitely! We have to get those!"

Before Camila could say anything, Sandra interjected with feigned sweetness. "Oh, look at me, I almost forgot to ask what Camila likes! Even though you're leaving, I just want to thank you for everything you've done for the lab. Tonight's on me—think of it as a send-off!"

She put extra emphasis on the words "send-off," her tone laced with what sounded like regret.

But Camila caught a flash of smug satisfaction in Sandra's eyes. She stared at her coolly.

This woman—what an actress. Almost Oscar-worthy.

But Camila wasn't buying it.

She spoke up, her voice icy. "Ms. Taylor, we barely know each other. We've never even worked together. If anyone should be giving me a send-off, it sure shouldn't be you."

Sandra blinked, momentarily thrown by the bluntness. Then her face shifted to a look of hurt confusion.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to overstep. I wasn’t trying to cause any trouble. I just thought… this was your role, and now I’m taking over, so it seemed right to see you off…”

She trailed off, bowing her head like a child caught misbehaving. “Camila, are you mad at me? Maybe I shouldn’t be taking the director position after all…”