

# From Substitute To Queen

## Chapter 2: I'm A Placeholder

Footsteps echoed down the stairs. I quickly wiped my face with the back of my hand and turned toward the kitchen sink, pretending to wash the empty tray.

"You're still up?" Darrell appeared in the doorway.

His hair was perfectly styled. The amber moss cologne I'd bought him for his birthday filled the kitchen. He wore the black button-down I'd given him last Christmas – the one he claimed was "too fancy for everyday wear."

*Going to handle pack business requires designer cologne and your best shirt?*

"Couldn't sleep." I turned around, forcing a smile. "You're dressed up."

He adjusted his collar. "Pack emergency. I need to head out."

"Now? It's almost midnight."

"Leadership doesn't follow a schedule, Sable." His eyes kept drifting toward the front door. "You should get some rest."

I stepped closer, reaching for his hand. "Can't it wait? Stay with me tonight?"

He pulled back slightly. "Sable, don't be childish. This is important."

"What kind of emergency?" I tilted my head, trying to keep my voice light. "Or are you meeting some girl?"

The question was meant to sound playful, but his face went rigid.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

The venom in his voice made me step back. He jerked his hand away from mine like my touch burned him.

"I was just joking—"

"That's not funny!" His voice turned ice-cold. "Why are you being so paranoid?"

"Darrell, I didn't mean—"

"I'm leaving." He spun toward the door. "Don't wait up."

The front door slammed shut with enough force to rattle the windows. I stood frozen in the kitchen, my hand still suspended in the air where his had been.

*He's going to pick up Camila. I saw their messages.*

But watching him leave so eagerly to be with another woman felt like torture. After twenty minutes of pacing the empty house, I couldn't stand it anymore. I grabbed my keys.

*I need to see this with my own eyes.*

Instead of heading straight to the airport, Darrell had stopped at Silver Moon bar first. A wave of relief washed over me – he wasn't rushing to her arms immediately. Maybe he needed liquid courage, or maybe he was having second thoughts.

Through the windows, I could see him at a corner table with Marcus, Jake, and Tommy from his inner circle.

I slipped inside and chose a booth near the back, hidden behind a decorative pillar. The lighting was dim enough that they wouldn't notice me unless they actively looked.

Darrell lit a cigarette, his face tense in the flickering flame.

"So Camila's really coming back?" Marcus leaned forward.

My stomach dropped.

"Yeah." Darrell took a long drag. "Her flight lands in two hours."

"What about Sable?" Jake asked.

Darrell's expression didn't change. "What about her?"

The casual dismissal in his tone cut deeper than any knife could.

"Dude, you've been with her for three years," Tommy said. "You can't just—"

"She was always temporary." Darrell flicked ash into the tray. "I never promised her forever."

"Right, because she's just the replacement," Marcus laughed. "You found her because she looks like Camila."

"The resemblance is what caught my attention." Darrell's voice remained completely flat. "I've been looking for pieces of Camila in her this whole time."

My vision blurred. Each word tore away another piece of the fantasy I'd been living.

"So she's basically been a placeholder," Jake said. "Poor thing probably thinks you're in love with her."

"Sable's useful," Darrell shrugged. "She's obedient, never complains, great in bed. Since she moved in, I don't have to worry about cooking or cleaning."

The men laughed, and the sound made my skin crawl.

"Jesus, you turned her into a live-in maid with benefits," Tommy chuckled.

"Pretty much. She handles all the domestic stuff, and when I need to blow off steam..." Darrell made a crude gesture that sent the table into another round of laughter.

"What happens when Camila wants you to choose?" Marcus asked.

"Sable won't be a problem. She's got nowhere else to go." Darrell stubbed out his cigarette. "And let's face it – female wolves are practical creatures. She won't walk away from the lifestyle I provide."

"True. She's probably too attached to the money and comfort to leave," Jake nodded. "These girls always are."

"Besides, she's so fucking devoted," Tommy added. "Buy her some flowers, apologize for being distant, and she'll forgive anything. That type is easy to control."

Darrell stood and threw some bills on the table. "I should head to the airport soon. Don't want to be late."

"Good luck, man. Hope the reunion goes well."

"I already know what I want."

The words followed me as I stumbled out of the bar. Cold river wind whipped through my hair, carrying the scent of water and decay. I walked to the railing and gripped the metal until my knuckles went white.

*Every time he looked at me, he was seeing her face.*

*Every "I love you" was meant for someone else.*

*I've been living in another woman's shadow this entire time.*

I pressed my hands against my chest, trying to ease the crushing weight there.

I couldn't stay. Not after learning I was nothing more than a convenient substitute.

My phone felt heavy in my hands as I scrolled to a number I hadn't called in months. The phone rang twice before a familiar voice answered.

"Sable?"

"Dad." My voice came out steadier than I expected. "I want to come home."

Silence stretched between us. When he spoke again, his voice carried years of hurt and hope.

"What happened?"

"Nothing happened. I'm just... tired of playing house." I stared at my reflection in the dark water. "I want to accept the arrangement with Caelan."

"Sable—"

"I was wrong to fight you on this. I was young and stupid and thought I knew better. I should have listened."

"You don't have to explain yourself to me." His voice grew gentle. "You're my daughter. I've never stopped loving you, no matter how angry I was."

Tears threatened again, but I blinked them back. "I'll handle things here and come back to Blackwood soon."

"Take your time. The offer still stands - it always has."

"Thank you, Dad."

"Sable?" He hesitated. "Whatever brought you to this decision... I'm glad you're coming home."

After I hung up, I sat by the river. Ten minutes later, my phone buzzed with an incoming message. The name on the screen made my heart skip: Caelan Blackwood.

*"The ceremony is set for next month. I'm flying to Moonridge tomorrow."*

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