

## SWEET TASTE OF SUCCESS

by Pauline Hayton

Sarah sat with friends at the bar of her busy restaurant. She was bursting with pride on this opening night of her and David's SWEET TASTE OF SUCCESS. The speed at which their booming enterprise developed astounded them. People liked the informal, tropical ambiance they had created. It was a place to see and be seen, but also with cozy corners for celebrities to chill out unnoticed. The place was full. People were even lined up outside. Mouthwatering smells of delicious food filled the air as busy servers brought food to tables.

Sitting on the bar stool, drink in hand, she scanned the bustle of the room, checking all was going well. Her gaze fell on one particular man dining with a woman. A blast from the past. With a shaking hand, Sarah placed her drink on the bar, excused herself from her friends, and made her way between tables to the man and his companion.

The trauma of the last time she had seen him was etched on her brain. Six years ago, Sarah had been a nightshift waitress at a busy twenty-four-hour Pancake Palace restaurant. Ron, was the night chef. It was just the two of them that night, the second waitress having called in sick. It was also Sarah's first night working solo after only a few days' training.

Ron had been in a bad mood since arriving for his shift. She thought she might be doing some things wrong. Then, without warning, Ron downed his apron and walked off the job at midnight, leaving Sarah alone. Sarah ran into the kitchen. Panic-stricken she pressed her back against the wall, closed her eyes tight shut, hugged herself. Then she ran to the noticeboard. Shit!

No managers' phone numbers there. Oh my God! Now what! She took slow deep breaths.

Having regained some semblance of composure, she re-entered the dining area.

People were waiting to be seated. She gathered up some menus, smiled widely, and led them to a booth. As she gave out the menus, Sarah calmly said, "We're having a small problem here tonight. Our cook has gone home sick. It's just me. I can cook pancakes, scrambled eggs and bacon, and toast. Will that do?"

For most people it would.

Even as the restaurant became busy with the nightclub crowd, police officers, and others who liked to dine at night, Sarah cooked and served, racing around on an adrenaline high.

At five, Charlie, her manager, arrived. "Hi, Sarah, how's it going?" He checked the table receipts. "Busy night." He strolled into the kitchen. Thirty seconds later, he raced out. "Sarah, where's Ron?"

"That bastard cleared off at midnight, left me high and dry."

"He left? You've been alone since midnight? So what did you do?"

"I did it all, cooked, served, everything."

"Why didn't you call me?"

She grabbed his arm, tight, and dragged him to the noticeboard and stood hands on hips, her cheeks flushed with anger. "Who was I supposed to contact? Where's your phone number? Where's anybody's number?"

"You should have closed the restaurant."

Her face now crimson, Sarah spat out, "I didn't know that was an option. What to do when the cook abandons ship wasn't covered in my training." *Besides, who can afford to lose a shift?*

Charlie shriveled beneath Sarah's contemptuous stare.

Trudy, the morning shift waitress flounced into the kitchen. "You could have tidied up the tables and condiments for me, Sarah."

Sarah resisted the urge to rip Trudy's head off. Instead, she grabbed her purse and jacket. "I'm off. I don't know if I'll be back tonight. The management here is shit."

Driving home she was shaking with rage as much at the foursome who left only a five-cent tip as at that dope Charlie. She knew she would be back for her night shift—if she hadn't blown it with Charlie. After hurricane Irma hit Florida, Sarah lost her assistant CPA job because she evacuated with her family without following company protocol. Unable to find other work in the aftermath of the hurricane, they lost their apartment. They had driven from Tampa to Naples knowing Sarah's grandmother would take them in: Sarah, David, and their two young daughters. Sarah needed this job. David was not having much luck finding full-time food prepping work.

Late that morning, Charlie phoned. "Sarah, you are coming in tonight, aren't you?"

His call woke her from a deep sleep. She replied with a groggy, "Yes."

"Good. I've put all necessary contact numbers on the noticeboard."

Sarah remained silent.

After an awkward pause, Charlie asked, "Sarah, did you say your husband was a cook? Would he like to work the night shift with you, at least until we find a replacement for Ron?"

Sarah's heart lurched. Her spirits lifted. "Yes, that would be good."

"Send him in to see me this afternoon before three."

The call ended. Sarah grinned at her husband her eyes glowing with excitement. "David, you have a job! It might only be temporary, but if you do OK, I'm sure they'll keep you on."

And that was the start of all things good. Grandma babysat. It wasn't hard. The children were usually asleep when Sarah and David left for work and only just starting wake up as they arrived home.

Ron looked up at Sarah's approach. His face turned ashen. Clearly uncomfortable, he looked around for an escape route. Too late. Sarah arrived at his table.

"Sarah! Fancy seeing you here. What a surprise."

"Hello, Ron. I just had to come over and see you."

"Sarah, this is my wife, Wendy."

"Hi, Wendy." Beaming, Sarah waved her arm around the room. "You may not realize it, but your husband is responsible for all this."

Ron stared at her puzzled.

Sarah pulled out a chair. "Mind if I join you for a moment?"

The waiter arrived. "Coffee for me please, John. And put their meal on my tab." After they ordered, she turned to Ron. "Do you remember when you walked out of the kitchen at the Pancake Palace, leaving me to it?"

Ron looked down, embarrassed. "Sarah, I . . ."

"I was so annoyed with you at the time, Ron, but as it turned out you did me a big favor." She smiled as his head jerked back in surprise. "A week after your walkout, I was the only waitress working again. You know how inefficient Charlie was at organizing his work force. Anyway, it was busy. A party of four arrived. I warned them it could be a forty-minute wait before food would reach their table as I was working the restaurant alone, but they were welcome to come and have drinks until I could take their order. They decided to wait and I sat

them in a booth. One of the men in the party told me he was in the restaurant business too. I didn't take much notice. I was too busy. Anyway, as I left the bill at the end of their meal, he said he was amazed that my manager had left me to work on my own. It wasn't right. It was too busy for one waitress. I stayed cheerful. I was happy. My husband David was working in the kitchen. That's another favor you did me by walking out."

Ron flinched.

"This guy then tells me he had lied to me. He wasn't just in the restaurant business. He was an executive for the Pancake Palace chain. That wiped the smile from my face. I'd broken the rule about getting people into a booth and serving them drinks so they would be less likely to walk out. I thought I would be fired for warning them there would be a long wait for food. Instead, he tells me he'd heard about how I'd handled your walkout and taken charge and kept the restaurant open. He was amazed. Offered me training to become a manager in the chain. I jumped at the chance. And here we are."

"This is your restaurant?"

"Yes, mine and David's. Our first of many, hopefully."

"I'm so relieved, Sarah. I felt terrible for walking out on you. I was in a bad place.

Wendy had been diagnosed with cancer that day and the prognosis was bad. I asked for the night off to be with her, but Charlie wouldn't cover it. I lost my job. Left a message for you to explain why I had to go home. I don't know if Charlie passed it on."

"It's OK, Ron. Everything worked out for the best." Sarah patted Wendy's shoulder and gave her a big smile. "And I see Wendy's still here."

Wendy took hold of Sarah's hand. "We came here tonight to celebrate. Today, the doctor told me I'm in remission and things look promising."

The waiter arrived with their order. Sarah stood. “Enjoy your first meal at Sweet Taste of Success.”