

## Chapter 27 Bruises

"Not yet. Feels like something bigger is about to drop," another replied quickly. "If we reveal it now, it'll kill the impact. Better to wait a little longer."

Vivian still didn't fully grasp the truth about how the showbiz worked.

The number of recording devices publicly listed never matched the real count.

There were always extra cameras, hidden mics, and people recording on the sly.

That was where the big scoops came from—the shadows.

And even then, only a small part of the mess ever reached the public. Most were bought off before it could make headlines.

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Backstage, the stage manager leaned over and said, "The second performer's almost done. Serena, get ready."

At the cue, Millie stepped out into the lights.

Out in the audience, Brandon stood. He hadn't planned to stay long.

Events like this weren't his thing, and he'd only come to see Vivian perform.

Now that she was done, he saw no reason to remain.

But he had barely taken a few steps when the third contestant walked onstage.

He turned instinctively.

"And now, please welcome to the stage—Serena Ellsworth," the host announced. The name caught his attention. Vivian had mentioned Serena before, calling her Charles' secret lover.

He hadn't thought much of it then. But now, for some reason, he paused.

People had been whispering about this woman all day—the contestant in

the mask. Now, here she was.

She stepped to the center of the stage, her hands relaxed around the mic. The first few notes left her lips—soft, steady, threaded with something intimate.

The room hushed itself. The crowd, which had been whispering just seconds ago, fell into silence.

Brandon frowned slightly. There was something familiar about the way she sang.

Not the voice exactly, but the tone. The vibe was close to Millie's style. But it wasn't a copy.

Serena's voice was deeper, more seasoned. There was a quiet sadness in the way she held her notes—like someone who'd walked through fire and didn't need to talk about it.

It wasn't dramatic. But it lingered. Soft, and then sharp, and then gone—like smoke. But it stayed with you.

Brandon's eyes narrowed as he looked closer. The woman on stage was dressed in a rose-red outfit that flared like flames.

Her figure and styling were all wrong for Millie.

She couldn't be Millie.

As the performance moved on, the soft hum grew, curling upward into a rising swell until Millie's voice broke through, clear and fierce, shattering the quiet and carrying the song to its peak.

The lights flared. Fire danced around the stage in bursts. Then everything went dark. A single spotlight switched on. Millie stood in its center, holding a violin.


Petals fell from above, drifting around her like snow. Then came the music. Not soft. Not sweet. It tore through the room—aching and beautiful.

She played in her red dress. The spotlight shifted, casting a clearer view of her arms, her collarbone, her shoulders—bruises.

Barely covered with makeup, they revealed themselves under the light.

They ran along her skin, more visible near her joints—rougher patches that told the story of deep wounds.

Together, the music and the image struck something in the audience.

The flames that surrounded her weren't just for effect. It was a return. She was a woman reborn. A phoenix rising from the ashes. 

Millie stood beneath the lights, dressed in deep red, the violin pressed against her shoulder. Each note she drew out carved through the air.

The music built, sharp and unyielding, and not a single gaze turned away.

To those watching, she was now more than a performer—she was someone who had walked through fire and come out shining.

Even after the last note faded and the flames slipped into silence, the audience remained still, held in the weight of what they had just witnessed.

Millie lowered her violin slowly, her gaze lifting just in time to see Brandon nearby.

Their eyes met.

Brandon's brow drew in slightly.

His heart thudded harder than it should have. Maybe it was the intensity of the performance. Or maybe it was something else.


There was something about her. Dangerous. Distant. But impossible to look away from.

Then the applause began—loud, rising like a wave, swallowing the silence.

Surrounded by claps and cheers that filled the air, it was Brandon who looked away first, quietly turning his back on her.

"Thank you," Millie said softly from the stage, her voice steady, almost too calm for what had just happened.

Brandon glanced over at Charles, who looked thrilled.

But all Brandon could think about were her bruises. What kind of man let his woman suffer like that and seemed more focused on the song than her pain? 

Still, he reminded himself—it was none of his business.

She wasn't his woman. 

Without another glance, Brandon turned and left.

On stage, Millie gave a deep bow to the audience and followed the staff's cue to exit.

Offstage, Barbara rushed over, nearly bouncing.

"Serena, that was incredible! I mean it—I got chills!" she said, clutching Millie's hand.

Millie flinched a little but still gave her a small smile. "Thank you."

She had only rested for three days. It wasn't enough.

Before, she remained seated as much as she could. But up there on stage, she hadn't held back.

Now, her body was catching up to her.

"Serena, who did your special effects makeup? These bruises look unbelievably real!" Barbara leaned closer, eyes wide.

"Careful," Charles said, stepping in quickly and pulling Barbara aside. "Those aren't fake."

"What?" Barbara froze. She looked down at her hand.

The makeup had smeared slightly, revealing the raw truth underneath.

"Oh no..." Barbara covered her mouth, her voice shaking. "I didn't mean to—Serena, I'm so sorry, I didn't know—"

Millie let out a quiet laugh and gave a small shake of her head. Barbara didn't know any better.

Barbara looked like she might cry. Millie leaned against her with a whisper of a grin.

"Could you lend me a hand? I'm really at my limit."

"Of course!" Barbara immediately looped her arm under Millie's.

But they didn't get far. Just a few steps in, Vivian appeared, blocking the path with a perfectly timed smile.

"Your performance was stunning," she said. "Truly. Congratulations, Serena."

Millie looked at her but said nothing.

Vivian went on, still smiling. "Remember what I told you earlier? About that person? I wasn't lying. If you want the full story, come to me later."

Around them, applause still echoed faintly through the hall.

Millie let out a light laugh. "No need."

She turned to Charles briefly. He didn't understand what she meant.

Then, without another word, she left with Barbara and Charles beside her.

Vivian stayed behind, watching their backs disappear.

She had come to provoke, to shake her. If anything, Serena had gone out and stolen the entire show.

Right after the performance had started, she had stormed into the control room and used Brandon's name to pressure the staff—asking them to lower Serena's broadcast quality. 📢

To Vivian, Serena was completely oblivious—this was her moment, yet Serena had the nerve to draw all the light to herself.

Vivian's eyes narrowed, calculating. She pulled out her phone and dialed, her mind already spinning with her next move.