

Chapter 31 You Can't Fool Me

Vivian smiled as she looked at the masked woman in front of her.

There was a sharpness behind her gaze.

Before this part started she had sent a message to Serena. "Even if you don't come to me first, I'll still tell you this—Millie signed with Evans Entertainment a year ago. She's been tied to Charles ever since. You lost a child for him, and still, no one knows you're his girlfriend. That has to sting. Join my team. I won't mention your miscarriage, and with the attention we're getting now, I can help you shine. I'll make Charles see you. And Millie? She'll be seen for what she is—a woman who shifts easily and always needs a man to lean on. This isn't a threat, Serena. It's a sincere offer."

Vivian thought the mix of pressure and promises would be enough to sway Serena.


But Millie stood quietly now, watching her, fully aware of how Vivian liked to play games.

Millie turned to the audience and bowed, holding the mic with a calm grace.

Then she looked at the three judges in front of her.

Leonard Happer was thirty-two, a pop singer whose signature love songs filled playlists and radio charts.

Alex Hayes—twenty-eight, rising fast in the alt-pop scene, leading his own band.

And Vivian—twenty-five, famous not for music but for her delicate looks, her floral design business, and her role in promoting Heavenly Melody. 

All three had asked her to join their team.

Millie spoke with quiet clarity. "Thank you all for your kind invitations.

Too bad I can only choose one..." she paused, letting the silence stretch just enough. "Based on my music style, and what I hope to learn here, I've decided..."

The judges' seats were arranged in a half-circle—Vivian in the middle, the others on either side.

Millie walked straight ahead.

Vivian's expression relaxed into a self-assured smile, certain she was about to win.

But just before reaching her, Millie turned. She walked toward Alex.

"Mr. Hayes," she said, voice calm and respectful, "may I join your team?"

Alex glanced toward Vivian, catching the subtle change in her expression, and then smiled and stood.

"I'd be honored," he said, shaking her hand.

The camera zoomed in on their handshake—while just behind them, Vivian's smile had frozen in place.

Brandon watched it unfold from the screen, frowning slightly.

He could tell Serena had baited Vivian into thinking she'd won. Then, in one clean pivot, she'd handed the moment to someone else.

Why?

...

The team selection round had the audience completely hooked—some cheered, others groaned in frustration.

Millie, now seated behind Alex as part of his team, sat quietly.

Vivian kept glancing her way, but Millie never looked back.

Taping went on for hours, with commercial breaks built in for everyone to rest and regroup.

During one of those breaks, Millie stepped out to use the restroom.

She was barely halfway down the hallway when Vivian stepped in front of her.

"You didn't see my message?" Vivian asked, eyes narrowed.

"I saw it," Millie said calmly.

Vivian grabbed her collar and yanked her to the side. "Then why? Why did you humiliate me like that?"

Millie laughed under her breath and peeled Vivian's hand off her clothes.

"I made a choice," she said. "That's all. Between song style and experience, I think Alex is the better fit. I want to stay in the show and grow as much as I can as a musician. That's all there is to it."

Vivian let out a sharp laugh.

"I really thought you'd get it by now. But you still don't," she said. "Do you even know why you lost to Millie? You've never understood the core of it. This world is about marketing. Do you think this show is just about who sings best? Wake up! It's never about how well you sing or write. It's about image. Evans Entertainment didn't invest in you because they love your talent. They're counting on your market value. Monetization. Do you get that?"

Her words came fast, biting.

"Style? Experience?" Vivian scoffed. "Serena, don't you think you're being a little too pretentious, too self-important?"

Millie looked at her calmly, unaffected. "I don't get it," she said. "If you really only have six months left, why are you still clinging to all this? Wouldn't it make more sense to just live your life in peace?"

Vivian's eyes flickered for a second, caught off guard.

But she recovered quickly. She couldn't let the truth slip.

So she changed the subject. "You can still switch," she said, stepping closer. "Join my team. Or we can make another deal."

The space between them shrank, the tension settling like a fog.

"I'll give you time to think it through. We're on the same side. We both want the same thing."

With that, Vivian turned and walked off, leaving Millie standing alone.

Millie watched her leave, quiet, unsure what to make of it.

Vivian already had Brandon. He was right there beside her.

So why the games?

What was she trying to prove?

And why direct it all at her?

...

The hours passed quickly. The taping stretched from morning to night.

By the time it wrapped up, everyone was running on fumes.

The sky outside had darkened.

Millie walked slowly, supported by Charles. She was too weak to stand on her own.

Charles looked at her and let out a deep sigh.

He had told her to rest, tried to talk her out of pushing herself too far. But Millie had insisted.

She wanted to grow stronger. She needed to. It was the only way she could regain control of her life.

As they rounded the corner toward the waiting vehicle, Millie noticed someone standing by the car.


Brandon.

She glanced at Charles, who shook his head—this wasn't something he had arranged.

Brandon spoke first. "Can we talk?"

Charles looked like he was about to say no, but Millie gently pressed his arm. Then she straightened up and gestured for Brandon to follow her into the nearby grove of trees.

Once there, she turned and said, "What do you want to talk about, Mr. Watson?"

The sound of her voice caught Brandon off guard. It stirred something in his memory—too familiar to ignore. 

He looked at her more closely.

She wore a long coat over her performance outfit, but her frame was slight, unmistakably so.

Of all the women he had ever known, not one had a body quite like hers.

He searched her masked face, and then asked directly, "Why did you mislead Vivian during the selection earlier?"

Millie let out a dry laugh.

"Mislead her?" she said. "I didn't mislead anyone."

Brandon's brow creased. "Don't pretend. I know what you did. You can't fool me."

Millie pressed her lips together and turned away.

It was the same tone.

The same look he had given her all those years ago—when her stepfather had hit her, and she came to school trying to hide it. He had pulled her aside then and said, "Millie, do you even know what you look like right now? Stop lying. You can't fool me."

But this time, the words came from across a line. Not of care. But of suspicion. He wasn't standing beside her anymore.



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