

Chapter 7

Serena stepped closer, chin lifted, voice sharp enough to make nearby guests turn.

"You really called yourself my husband's girlfriend? That's bold. Delusional, but bold." She looked Charlotte up and down. "What makes you think you're anywhere near my level?"

Charlotte stared at her for two seconds, then laughed.

"Girlfriend? Don't insult me. I have standards." Her gaze dropped briefly to Jasper, then slid back to Serena. "And your level? Babe, if that's the bar, I'd need a shovel."

A few guests tried to hide their reactions behind champagne glasses.

"Oh?" Serena raised an eyebrow. "Then prove it. You know how to play piano, don't you? Let's have a little competition. Everyone here can judge who actually has talent."

Charlotte's lips curved.

Piano?

Was Serena trying to hand her the knife and lean into it?

"Sure," Charlotte said without hesitation.

Serena paused.

She had expected Charlotte to dodge, panic, or make excuses. Instead, Charlotte looked bored, which made Serena's chest tighten with irritation.

Fine. If Charlotte wanted to embarrass herself in public, Serena would happily sell tickets.

"Great," Serena said, raising her voice so more people could hear. "Since

we have witnesses, let's make it interesting. If you lose, you leave this party. And I mean crawl out. After that, you stay away from Jasper forever."

Jasper frowned. "Serena..."

"Quiet," Serena snapped without looking at him.

Charlotte didn't even blink. "Fine. But if you lose, you get on your knees, apologize, call me Queen Charlotte three times, and admit in front of everyone that you were the side chick."

The room went still.

Serena's face twitched. "You wish."

"Then don't lose."

"Deal," Serena said instantly.

In her mind, there was no chance she would lose.

Back when Jasper and Charlotte were still together, Serena had crossed paths with them more than once. She had never seen Charlotte touch a piano. Not once. Charlotte didn't look trained, polished, or refined enough for real classical music.

Serena, on the other hand, had played since childhood. People had called her gifted. Her parents had shown her off at parties. She knew how to work a room.

Tonight, she would do it again.

"I'll go first," Serena said, already moving toward the piano.

Charlotte made a lazy gesture. "Please. Warm up the seat for me."

Serena's jaw tightened.

She sat down, adjusted her posture, and placed her fingers on the keys. The opening notes were clean enough. Her dress sparkled under the lights, and she made sure to smile at the crowd between movements.

She wasn't terrible. She had technique. She had training.

But she also missed several notes.

Most of the guests didn't catch it. A few did. Their smiles became polite instead of impressed.

Serena knew she had slipped, but she refused to care. She hadn't practiced seriously in years. Still, compared to Charlotte, it had to be enough.

When the last note ended, applause rose through the room.

Serena stood with a satisfied smile and turned toward Charlotte.

"Your turn," she said. "Try not to panic."

Charlotte walked to the piano bench.

She didn't rush. She didn't pose. She simply sat down, settled her hands above the keys, and looked at Serena.

"Don't worry," Charlotte said. "I don't panic for amateurs."

Serena's smile disappeared.

Charlotte's fingers touched the keys.

The first notes cut through the room with perfect control.

Then the music surged.

Her hands moved with frightening precision, every note clear, every shift smooth. The piece was brutally difficult, the kind that exposed every weakness in a player. Charlotte didn't just survive it. She owned it.

The guests who had been whispering went silent.

Even people who knew nothing about classical music understood one thing.

This was not close.

Serena's performance had been nice.

Charlotte's was undeniable.

Serena's face drained of color.

Her fingers curled at her sides, nails biting into her palms. Her chest rose and fell too quickly. She kept waiting for Charlotte to miss a note, to hesitate, to prove this was some trick.

But Charlotte didn't.

She played with speed, emotion, and control. She made the piano obey.

Jasper stared at her, stunned.

Alexander stood not far away in his dark suit, watching quietly. His expression barely changed, but approval flickered in his eyes.

So she could do this too.

Interesting.

When Charlotte finished, the final note lingered in the air.

For a moment, no one moved.

Then applause broke out, louder than before. This time, it wasn't polite. It was real.

Charlotte stood and turned to Serena, calm as ever.

"Well?" she asked. "Ready to kneel, or do you need emotional support first?"

Serena's lips parted. "No. This is impossible."

Charlotte tilted her head. "That's not an answer."

"You cheated," Serena snapped. "There's no way you played that."

Charlotte looked at the piano, then back at her. "The piano did not play itself, sweetheart."

A few people laughed.

Serena's eyes flashed with humiliation. "There was no official judge. You don't get to declare yourself the winner."

"Fine," Charlotte said, folding her arms. "Then play what I just played. If you can hit even eighty percent of my level, I'll count it as your win."

Serena froze.

Her throat tightened.

She couldn't play it. Not even close. She knew it. Charlotte knew it. Worse, everyone else knew it now too.

Charlotte raised her voice enough for the surrounding guests to hear.

"So that's your thing? You make the bet, you lose the bet, then suddenly the rules don't count?" Her eyes sharpened. "You were very loud when you thought I'd be the one crawling."

Serena's face burned.

She turned to Jasper, silently begging him to step in.

Jasper moved forward at once, placing himself in front of her.

"Charlotte, enough," he said, lowering his voice. "This is Mr. Nash's birthday party, not your personal revenge show."

Charlotte stared at him. "Funny. I don't remember inviting your wife to start a talent show."

"Let it go," Jasper said, eyes pleading. "We can talk later."

She looked past him at Serena. "She challenged me. She named the punishment. Now she wants to cry because she lost. That's not my problem."

Serena shoved Jasper aside, eyes wild.

"You bitch!" she screamed. "You set me up!"

Charlotte gave her a flat look. "By knowing how to play piano? Tragic. Someone call the FBI."

Serena snapped.

She lunged at Charlotte, hands raised, aiming straight for her face.

Before she could reach her, Alexander's voice cut through the room.

"Security."

One word, calm and cold.

Two bodyguards moved in immediately. One caught Serena by the arm. The other blocked Jasper when he tried to interfere.

Alexander looked at them without a trace of patience. "Take them out."

"Yes, sir."

"What the hell?" Jasper snapped. "You can't just throw us out."

Alexander walked closer, his gaze hard. "Watch me."

Serena struggled against the guard's grip. "Let go of me! Do you know who I am?"

Alexander's mouth curved slightly. "Unfortunately, yes."

Her face twisted. "You have no right!"

"You caused a scene at Mr. Nash's party," Alexander said. "I'm helping him clean it up."

He turned toward the older man nearby. "Isn't that right, Mr. Nash?"

Mr. Nash looked between Alexander, Jasper, and Serena, sweat beading at his temple.

Jasper might have recently been accepted into the Sinclair family, but Alexander was not someone he could afford to offend.

Mr. Nash forced a tight nod. "Yes. Please escort them out."

Serena's eyes widened. "You're all insane! Let me go!"

She thrashed hard, but the bodyguard didn't budge.

"Wait," Charlotte said.

Her voice was calm, but it carried.

The bodyguards paused.

Serena snapped her head toward Charlotte, breathing hard. For one second, hope flashed across her face.

Charlotte walked over slowly.

Serena lifted her chin, trying to recover some dignity. "What? Feeling guilty now?"

Charlotte smiled.

"Not even a little."

Before Serena could react, Charlotte kicked the inside of her ankle.

Serena cried out as her leg buckled. The bodyguard released her just enough, and she dropped straight to her knees in front of Charlotte.

The sound hit the floor hard.

Gasps rippled through the guests.

Charlotte looked down at her.

"There," she said. "Much better. Now say it properly."

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