The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 791

Serena Tiffany held up her hands in the morning light and looked at her fingers.

"Ten," she said. Her voice was low and rough, like a door that hadn't been opened for a long time. "I have ten. I'd forgotten."

Then she looked past her hands, at the window. Morning light lay on the bare floorboards in a long gold square, with the shadow of the bars across it. She looked at it the way other people look at the sea.

Her mother used to read her an old poet at bedtime.

Had I not seen the Sun / I could have borne the shade / But Light a newer Wilderness/My Wilderness has made.

At nine, Serena had thought it was a sad poem. Now she understood that it was a warning.

I've seen it now, she thought. Nobody puts me back in the dark. Not ever again.

Around the narrow bed in the tower, much too thin, long dark hair loose on the pillow, she looked up at them.

The family stood in a half-circle and didn't breathe: the Baroness with her cane, Pauline, Cordelia with her hand over her mouth, Patricia white as paper at the back. Gideon stood by the door, crying without making any sound.

Marissa stood beside him with her mouth open, which for Marissa was the same thing.

"Sweetheart," Gideon whispered. "Sweetheart, can you — "

"I can see you, Father." Serena turned her head towards the door, gentle. "Don't cry.

I can see you crying now. That's worse."

She looked at him a moment longer. "Your hair's gone grey."

"It was a long two years," Gideon said hoarsely.

"Is she going to need glasses?" Marissa asked nobody, anxious. "Who pays for the glasses?"

"Serena," the Baroness said sharply. "Look at me."

Serena looked at her.

"You've got older, Grandmother," Serena said calmly.

Cordelia made a noise like a kettle.

"Who was in this room?" Serena asked quietly. She was frowning now, turning her head, breathing in. "Last night. Somebody was here."

"Nobody was here, darling," Pauline said smoothly. "The door was locked. It's always locked."

"Someone was here," Serena said, stubborn. She breathed in again. "It smells of cedar."

The family looked at one another. Every one of them sniffed the air, and none of them smelled anything at all.

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Dr. Osmond Reeve arrived at half past seven, out of breath, with his bag.

He shone his little torch into her left eye, then her right, then her left again, and his face went the colour of cold porridge.

"Follow my finger," he said, nervous.

Serena followed it. Left, right, up, down. When he stopped, she looked past it, straight at him.

"Your hands are shaking, Doctor," Serena said flatly.

He dropped the torch.

"Well?" said the Baroness impatiently.

"A remarkable response," he said.

"To what?" the Baroness asked coldly.

"To my course, Baroness. The drops." His voice steadied as he went. "Two years of patience. I always said it would be slow. Medicine rewards patience. I confess, even

I didn't expect it to be so... complete."

"Drops!" Cordelia squealed, and clutched Pauline's arm. "Pauline, did you hear? Drops!"

"Your drops," said the Baroness slowly.

"I'd hoped," Reeve said humbly. "I never promised. But I'd hoped."

"How much were they, Doctor? These drops?" she asked dryly.

"Forty dollars a bottle, Baroness," he said, eager. "One bottle a month."

"Nine hundred and sixty dollars," said the Baroness, "for two eyes and a voice."

For a long moment the old woman looked at him. Then she nodded, once.

"Name your f*e, Doctor," she said.

"Oh, Baroness, I couldn't possibly-" he stammered.

"You could. You will. A f*e for life, and a room in this house whenever you want one." She rapped her cane on the floorboards. "And not one word of this outside these walls. Not to the staff, not to the city. Not to the idiot."

"Of course, Baroness," Reeve breathed. "Of course."

At four o'clock, Serena walked into the long drawing room on her own feet.

She wore dark glasses, because the light still hurt. She was as thin as a rail.

But she walked straight down the carpet to her grandmother's chair without touching anything, and the whole family, gathered for tea, went silent.

Patricia's teacup rattled on its saucer.

"Serena! Darling!" she said brightly. "We're all so happy for you!"

"Thank you, Patricia," Serena said coolly. She didn't look at her. "Grandmother. I'd like my place back."

Two years ago, everybody had said the seat would be hers. Then one winter morning she had woken blind and mute, the house had locked her in the tower, and Pauline had become acting heir.

"Your place?" the Baroness repeated, cold.

"In the succession. I was in it two years ago. My mother was the eldest daughter, and I'm hers." She took off the dark glasses, blinked hard against the window, and kept her eyes open can see I ca speak. I can work there's no reason I shouldn't."

"There's one reason," Pauline said smoothly. "You're getting married in five days."

"What does that have to do with it?"

"Everything, darling," said Cordelia sweetly. "A bride doesn't go back. A bride goes forward."

The Baroness looked at her granddaughter for a long time.

"After the wedding," she said. "We'll discuss it after the wedding."

Serena didn't argue. She turned, instead, to the corner by the fire, where Dr. Reeve was eating his third slice of cake as a guest of honour.

"Doctor," she said politely. "May I ask you something?"

"Of course, my dear," he said warmly. "Anything."

"What was in the drops?" she asked.

The cake stopped halfway to his mouth.

"In the — well. A preparation. Several things. Very gentle. Herbal, in the main, with a

— a strengthening tincture. Quite complicated. I wouldn't want to bore you."

"You won't," said Serena calmly. "I'm a perfumer. I can name everything in a bottle if

I smell it. Do you have one with you?"

"I — not with me. No," he stammered.

"Then bring one tomorrow," she said gently.

"Of course," said Dr. Reeve weakly, and put the cake down.

Across the room, Patricia had stopped drinking her tea.

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Half an hour later, in the back corridor behind the music room, where the staff hung the dust sheets, Patricia caught the doctor by the sleeve.

"You promised me," she hissed. "You said she'd never — "

"Not here, Miss Patricia." He was sweating again. "Not here."

"Then where? You said two years and she'd be — "

"She wants a bottle," he whispered. "Tomorrow. She'll smell it, and she'll know."

"Then you'll be ill tomorrow," Patricia hissed. "And the day after. And the day after that."

"For how long?"

"For as long as it takes me to think," she said.

A maid came round the corner with an armful of linen. Patricia let go of his sleeve and smiled at the maid, a sweet bright smile, until the girl had gone.

When she turned back, the doctor was already walking away, very fast, without his coat.

...

At the drawing room window, the

Baroness stood alone and watched her granddaughter cross the garden in the evening light, looking at everything. At the roses.ne th whotel.ne gravel. At her own shadow on the lawn.

Pauline came and stood beside her.

"A miracle bride for the idiot," Pauline said. "The city will laugh even harder."

"Will it?" The old woman didn't turn. "Two days ago she was a burden, Pauline. This morning she is Rosalma's daughter,

Dee Rosalind's nose and her own eyes. There are houses on this coast that would pay a great deal for that."

Pauline went very still.

"Mother," Pauline said carefully. "She's promised to the prince."

"She's promised to the pact," the old woman said.

"It's the same thing," Pauline said tensely.

"Is it?" the Baroness asked.

"The palace asked for a Tiffany granddaughter," the Baroness said. "I have more than one."

"And who would you give her to?" Pauline asked, very quiet.

"Whoever has a son worth having," said the old woman, "and a dowry worth more."

She tapped her cane against the glass, once. "She's worth something again. Send for Honoria Pryce."

"Then who will marry the Idiot?"

The Baroness looked at Pauline. "You."

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"Grandmother," Patricia cut in hastily. "You know I already have a boyfriend. He's a count, he's exceedingly wealthy, and he told me he's serious about us. We're going to be engaged soon!"

“I've been hearing that excuse for a year,” the matriarch replied coldly. "It is the only reason you remain in line for the succession right behind Serena. You had better bring him before me soon, or I will marry you off to that idiot prince instead.”

"Of course, Grandmother. But surely you haven't forgotten my younger cousin? Shouldn't she take her turn first?"

Lady Honoria Pryce arrived the next afternoon in a green motorcar the size of a boat, a big pink woman in three strings of pearls, bringing her son.

She talked about him the way a farmer talks about a horse at market.

"Look at him, Imelda," she boomed happily. "Go on, look. Good teeth. Good height. A sound temper, never raises his voice, never has. Rides, shoots, dances, reads a little, not too much." She slapped her son on the back. "And the lake shore comes with him. Twelve miles of it. The boathouses, the fishing rights, the hotel at the north end. He's cheap at the price."

Julian Pryce stood by the window with his hands in his pockets, looking at the garden as if it bored him. He was handsome in a smooth, finished way, like a piece of furniture that had been polished every day of its life.

"Mother," he said, bored, without turning round. "You're shouting."

"I'm selling, darling. It's not the same," Honoria said cheerfully, and dropped onto the sofa. "Well, Imelda? I hear you've had a miracle."

"You hear a great deal," said the Baroness dryly.

"Everybody hears everything on this coast," Honoria laughed. "Your doctor drinks at my club." Honoria leaned forward. "Rosalind's girl, cured. Rosalind's nose, they say, and her looks back. And promised to a prince with eleven dollars and no dowry. It's a crime, Imelda. It's a waste. I won't stand by and watch it."

"You'll stand by and watch your boy get the better of the bargain," the Baroness said coldly.

"Naturally," Honoria said, beaming. "So. Shall we talk?"

They talked for an hour. At the end of it the Baroness summoned the family to the long drawing room and told them what had been decided.

"On the wedding day there will be two men at the altar," she said flatly. "His Highness, as the pact requires. And Lord Julian Pryce, with his dowry. Serena will choose."

Nobody spoke.

"She'll choose Julian, of course," said Honoria, smug and comfortable. "Any girl with eyes would."

"Does Serena know?" Gideon asked from the end of the room. It was the first thing he had said all day.

"She'll know tonight," the Baroness said shortly.

"And the prince?" Gideon asked, nervous. "What happens to the prince?"

"The pact asks for a Tiffany granddaughter to marry him," the Baroness said. "It doesn't say which one. If Serena chooses Lord Julian, the prince marries the next granddaughter of age."

Every head in the room turned, slowly, to look at Cordelia's daughter.

Dulcie Tiffany was nineteen, small and pale, and she was sitting on a footstool behind her mother's chair, where she always sat, so that nobody would notice her. Everybody noticed her now.

"Me?" she whispered.

"Dulcie?" Cordelia shrieked. "Mother, you can't! Not Dulcie! He feeds the dogs!" "Then you'd better hope your niece chooses sensibly," said the Baroness, bored.

Dulcie burst into tears.

Honoria Pryce laughed so loudly that the windows rang.

In the yard, by the kennels, Julian Pryce found the other groom brushing a hound.

He stood and watched for a while, smoking, with the look of a man who has wandered into the wrong part of a zoo.

"So you're him," he said, bored. "The prince."

"So you're him," Alexander said mildly. "The lake."

Julian almost laughed. He flicked his ash onto the gravel.

"Nothi erson Your Highness. I'd rather not marry anybody. But Mother has three sons and one lake, and she's been trying to sell me since I was sixteen." He shrugged, and for a second the polish slipped. "On this coast a son's only worth the match he fetches. You know how it is."

"I'm learning," said Alexander, and kept brushing. "Does she ever ask what you'd like?"

Julian looked at him as if he'd spoken in another language.

"Nobody's ever asked me that," he said slowly. Then the smooth face came back. "Don't get ideas, dog boy. She'll choose the lake. They always do."

"Then you'll have a wife," Alexander said gently, "and I'll have the dogs. Everybody wins."

That night, behind the locked door of Pauline's study, Patricia couldn't stop walking.

"Twelve miles of prime lakeshore, Mother. Twelve miles. The boathouses, the boutique hotel-she'll be filthy rich. If she marries into the Pryces, looking like that with Rosalind's nose and her own eyes restored, she'll lock down the seat within a year. Grandmother is practically serving it to her on a silver platter!"

"Then marry the Pryce yourself!"

"Not a chance," Patricia snapped. "He's a mama's boy and a complete fool who can't take a breath without running to his mother first. I'm going to marry someone far wealthier—at least double his fortune."

"And where, exactly, is this wealthy suitor?" Pauline asked coolly.

"He's coming, alright? But in the meantime, Serena cannot marry into that family. It would turn her into far too great a threat to my succession!"

"Sit down, Patricia," Pauline said calmly.

"I can't sit down!" Patricia snapped.

"Then stand still. You're making me tired." Pauline didn't look up from the letter she was writing. "Your grandmother wants money. She's always wanted money. We can't stand in front of the Pryce money f we do, shellask why and we have no good answer."

"So we just let it happen?" Patricia hissed.

"No." Pauline put down her pen. "We make sure Serena picks the idiot," she said softly.

Patricia stared at her.

"Think, darling. Nobody votes for a woman married to an idiot. Married to Pryce, she's a rival. Married to the prince, she's a joke for the rest of her life. Pauline smiled. "Let her choose him. All we have to do is help her want to."

...

Pauline visited the tower the next morning, with a plate of the cook's best almond biscuits and a face full of sympathy.

"I won't stay long, darling," she said sweetly. "I only wanted to say..." She sat on the edge of the bed and lowered her voice.

"Be careful. The Pryces have buried two daughters-in-law. Honoria wants a girl to give her grandsons and keep quiet. You've only just got your voice back."

"Have they really buried two?" Serena asked quietly.

"One, certainly. The other went abroad. Nobody's heard from her." Pauline patted her hand, gentle as a nurse. "The prince is a fool, darling, but a fool is harmless. He'd leave you alone. You could work. Think about it."

"I will," said Serena politely. "Thank you, Aunt."

When the door had closed, she sat for a long time, looking at the biscuits.

Pauline had never brought her so much as a cup of tea in two years.

"Thank you, Aunt," she said again, softly, to the closed door. "I'll remember who gave me that advice."

From the barred window she could see the garden.

On the stone bench by the roses sat Dulcie, small and pale in a grey dress, with her face in her hands, while her mother's voice carried up from the terrace: the dog boy, Mother, the dog boy!

Serena watched her cousin for a long time.

Then she went to the shelf where her mother's books had stood for twenty years and took down the old red Shakespeare, the only one Pauline hadn't thought worth taking.

It fell open where it always had. This above all: to thine own self be true. Beside it, in Rosalind's quick pencil, was a note in the margin: The only sensible thing the old fool says in the whole play.

Serena laughed out loud for the first time in two years. It came out rusty and surprised her.

True to myself, she thought. Not to the lake. Not to the house. Not to Aunt Pauline's biscuits.

She closed the book. Then I'd better decide what that is, before they decide it for me.

That afternoon, Serena went down to her grandmother's study and didn't knock.

"I'll choose," she said evenly. "But I have terms."

The Baroness put down her pen. "Terms?"

"Two," Serena said. "Write them down, please, and sign them, and I'll choose on the day in front of everybody, the way you want. First: whoever I choose, I go back into the succession. Not after the wedding. On the day."

"Go on," the Baroness said, amused.

"Second," Serena said steadily. "My mother's notebooks. Twenty years of her work. Pauline has had them since the funeral. I want them back, every one."

The old woman pulled a sheet of paper towards her and wrote two lines in her sharp, upright hand. "Very well. Your place on the day, and the notebooks. Sign as witness, Pauline."

Pauline, at the door, signed. Her pen didn't hesitate at all.

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That night, alone in the tower, Serena took the one page she owned of her mother's work out of the battered box on her desk.

She had kept it there for two years and read it only with her fingertips: the last formula Rosalind Tiffany ever wrote, half finished, unsigned. Now she held it to the lamp and read it with her own eyes, line by line, and had to stop twice.

Then, from habit, she lifted the page to her face.

Paper. Ink. Old rose, from her mother's hands, four years faded.

And underneath, so faint that she almost missed it, something that had not been there a week ago.

Cedar.

Serena sat very still on the edge of the bed, with the page against her face, for a long time.

"Who are you?" she whispered, to the empty room.

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On the night before the wedding, Serena was still holding her mother's page.

She sat on the narrow bed with the paper against her face. Old rose. Ink. Under it, faint as a breath, cedar.

Two soft knocks, then a third, a little late. She knew that knock.

"Serena?" Gideon said quietly, through the door. "It's your father."

"I know, Father," she said gently. "Come in."

He didn't come in. He never did.

"They won't let me walk you up tomorrow," he said, miserable. "Your grandmother says it would look as if the house chose for you. On this coast the bride walks alone. She goes to fetch the man she wants."

"Then I'll fetch him," Serena said calmly.

"I came up these stairs twice," he whispered. "In two years. Twice. I stood outside this door and I couldn't open it."

Her throat went tight.

"I'm not brave, sweetheart," Gideon said, very low. "You know I'm not."

"You read me a line once," she said softly. "From the green book. The old teacher from the east. Do you remember it?"

A long silence on the other side of the door.

"To see what is right and not to do it is want of courage," he said hoarsely.

"You read it to me when I was six," Serena said. "I thought it was about other people."

She opened the door. He stood on the top step, grey and stooped.

"So did I," Gideon said, ashamed.

"Then start tomorrow." She held his eyes. "You don't have to walk me anywhere.

Just stand up when I go past. And don't look at your shoes."

His eyes filled.

"I'll try," he whispered.

"Father." She held the door. "The prince. What do you think of him?"

He thought about it for a long time.

"He feeds the dogs," Gideon said slowly. "He says thank you to everyone. Even to Preston." He almost smiled. "And he's the only man in this house who never once looks at his shoes."

By ten the next morning, the entrance hall was lined with gift tables under white cloth, and the guests walked along them reading prices nobody had written down.

The Pryce table came first. Deeds on a silk cushion. A gold-framed map of the lake shore.

"Twelve miles," a woman in green breathed, impressed. "Honoria isn't giving a son. She's giving a county."

"She's buying a nose," her husband said dryly. "Rosalind's nose. Everybody knows it."

Then Patricia's table, though it wasn't her wedding. One velvet case. A diamond as big as a quail's egg.

"From Count Charles," Patricia announced sweetly, to anyone who stopped. "He's flying in from the capital next week. He couldn't wait to send it."

"Is he really that rich?" a girl asked, amazed.

"Twice the Pryces," Patricia said, smiling. "At least."

A quiet man in a cheap brown suit stood beside it, looking only at the stone.

Alexander passed with a crate of glasses for the kitchen. Felicia walked at his elbow.

"Who's the man in the brown suit?" she whispered, curious.

"A jeweller's man," Alexander murmured. "He's waiting to take the stone back at five."

"Back?" Felicia frowned. "Why would anyone take a gift back?"

"Ask the count," he said mildly, and kept walking.

At the very end, by the cloakroom door, was a third table. Empty. One card, in

Pauline's neat hand: From His Highness, the Count.

"Oh, look," a man called, delighted. "The prince's gifts!"

"Don't be cruel, darling," his wife said, laughing harder. "He has eleven dollars. Maybe he's saving them."

"Twelve," somebody corrected. "I heard there's a coin."

"A groom with no dowry isn't a groom," an old lady sniffed. "He's a lodger."

"When the Ashworth girl married," another said grandly, "the groom gave her a racehorse. A racehorse! This one gives her a tablecloth."

Marissa stopped at the empty table in her new pink coat and frowned.

"Is there a table for us?" she asked hopefully. "The bride's family. Do we get gifts?"

"You're the bride's family, Marissa," Cordelia giggled into her sherry. "You're supposed to give them."

"Then I'm keeping my coat," she said firmly.

At eleven o'clock, there was no groom.

The great hall was full. By the high table, Julian Pryce stood alone in a grey morning suit, checking his watch.

"That's four times," a girl whispered, giggling. "Lord Julian has checked his watch four times."

"He's bored," her friend said. "It's the lake. Twelve miles of water would bore anyone."

"He's run," a man whispered, pleased.

"Of course he's run," Preston said loudly from the front bench, phone up. "Would you marry a blind girl in front of the whole coast? He's halfway to Harland on a fishing boat."

"She's not blind any more," Cordelia murmured.

"She was blind when he signed up," Preston said, grinning. "Nobody told him about the refund policy."

The bench roared.

In the garage room behind the kennels, Alexander sat on the narrow bed with the phone in both hands. He wore his old Harland coat, salt-stiff wool that smelled of cedar.

Felicia ran in, out of breath, white flowers in her fist.

"Prince," she said urgently. "They're saying you've run!"

"I know," he said quietly.

"It's eleven! Julian Pryce is standing up there alone and smiling!" She grabbed his sleeve. "Who are you waiting for?"

"A surgeon," Alexander said.

She stared at him.

The phone buzzed. He answered before the first ring ended.

It was Ivo. The big fisherman was crying too hard to talk.

"Your Highness," Ivo sobbed. "It's done. Seven hours. They fixed it. The doctor came out smiling. Smiling!"

Alexander closed his eyes.

"He's awake?" he asked, very low.

"Awake and furious," Ivo said, laughing through it. "Wait. He wants the phone."

A rustle. A cough. Then a thin old voice, weak as paper and mean as ever.

"Is that the idiot?" Tom rasped.

"It's me, Tom."

"Somaid for this," Tom said foot angrily "A foundation. Nobody will tell me who If it' was you break your nose."

"It wasn't me," Alexander said gently. "I have eleven dollars."

"Good." Tom breathed hard. "Ivo says it's your wedding day."

"It is."

"Then what are you doing on the phone with an old man?" Tom snapped. "Tell the idiot I'm not dead. Go and get married."

The line clicked.

Fourteen years Felicia had known his empty face. She had never seen it do this.

His mouth shook once. Then it was still.

"Tom?" she whispered, scared.

"Tom's alive," he said, and his voice broke in the middle.

Felicia burst into tears and shoved the flowers into his hands.

"Then go," she ordered, wiping her face. "Go!"

He walked up the drive with the white flowers.

"Look!" someone shrieked, delighted. "He walked! He couldn't even get a car!"

"Lost your carriage again, Your Highness?" Preston called, filming.

"Are those weeds?" a woman laughed. "Did he pick weeds from the yard?"

"They're all laughing, Prince," Felicia muttered, chin up.

"They'll stop," Alexander said mildly.

"You came," Julian said, bored and a little surprised. "I had money on you running."

"So did I," Alexander said.

Julian almost laughed.

Then the music changed. The doors opened. In white, with no one beside her at all, the bride stood alone.

She lifted the veil off her face and let it fall to the floor.

"She's taken off the veil," a woman whispered, shocked.

"She can't see properly yet," another hissed. "She'll walk into a bench."

Serena walked. Straight down the middle. She didn't touch a single bench.

On the third row, Gideon half rose, and sat. Then, as she passed, he stood up all the way.

"Gideon," Cordelia hissed, shocked. "Sit down. You'll make it look as if the house chose!"

"I'm not choosing anything," Gideon said quietly. "I'm standing up."

He didn't look at his shoes. Serena's mouth moved, very slightly. Almost a smile.

On the front bench, Patricia leaned to her mother.

"What if she takes the lake?" she whispered, tense.

"She won't Pauline murmured, calm as glass. I spent a whole plate of biscuits on it. She'll pick the idiot, and She'll be a joke for the rest of her life

"And if she doesn't?"

"Then we'll need another plan," Pauline said softly. "And I don't like needing another plan."

And she stopped in front of Julian Pryce.

Julian bowed, smooth and sure. On the front bench, Lady Honoria beamed like a woman watching her horse cross the line.

"Lady Serena," Julian said politely.

"Lord Julian," Serena said quietly.

"Go on, darling," Honoria whispered loudly, delighted. "Go on, take his hand!"

Serena looked at Julian for a long set time. second bench to Dulcie, small and her eyes slid once to the pale gripping her mother's arm.

Serena turned away from Julian and took one step to the left.

The hall made a sound like a wave going out.

She stood in front of the prince. Up close, she breathed in.

And froze.

Cedar. Salt. Old wool.

Her hand came up an inch toward his sleeve and stopped. Her body knew something her head didn't.

"So you're the joke," she said softly.

"So are you," Alexander said mildly. Serena opened her mouth to choose.

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Serena could hear her own heart.

On her left, the lake. A husband who would never be cruel, because he would never care enough to be.

On her right, the joke. The man who had crawled round a ballroom on his knees for a fisherman, and then put a tray down on a paper and said no.

An old poet came into her head. Her mother's favourite, the one with the long beard on the cover.

I exist as I am, that is enough.

"I choose the prince," Serena said.

For one second, nothing. Then the great hall exploded.

"What did she say?" a woman shrieked, jumping up.

"The prince? The idiot?" a man cried, stunned.

"She can't mean it!"

Lady Honoria was on her feet, pink to the ears, pearls swinging.

"She misspoke!" Honoria cried, outraged. "Imelda, the girl misspoke! She's been in the dark two years, she's confused. She means Julian. She means the lake!"

"I don't mean the lake," Serena said clearly.

"Darling, you don't know what you're saying!"

"I know exactly what I'm saying, Lady Honoria," Serena said calmly. "I've had two years of silence to practise it."

Cordelia made a noise like a kettle and sat down hard, right on Marissa's pink coat. "My coat!" Marissa squeaked, horrified.

"Oh, thank heaven," Cordelia sobbed, clutching her chest. "Dulcie, darling, you're safe!"

On the second bench, Dulcie burst into tears and couldn't stop.

The Baroness hadn't moved, small and straight at the high table, her ebony cane across her knees.

"Imelda!" Honoria snapped, turning on her. "We had an understanding!"

"We had an understanding," the Baroness said dryly, "that my granddaughter would choose. She has chosen."

"She chose wrong!"

"That's her business."

"Then let her choose again!" Honoria pleaded. "Let her sit down, have a glass of water, and choose properly!"

Serena turned to her grandmother.

"Grandmother," she said politely. "Tell Lady Honoria the law of this hall."

Something moved in the old eyes. It might have been anger. It might have been respect.

"In this hall," the Baroness said, cold and clear, "a Tiffany bride speaks her choice once. Two hundred years. I won't break it for a lake." She flicked a finger. "Sit down, Honoria. You're blocking the guests."

Honoria sat.

"And my terms, Grandmother," Serena said evenly.

The Baroness sighed and held out her hand. A footman put the folded paper in it.

"Whoever my granddaughter chooses," the Baroness read, flat and fast, "she goes back into the line of succession. Not after the wedding. On the day. And her mother's notebooks, all of them, returned." She glanced up. "Witnessed by Pauline Tiffany."

"On the day?" a man whispered, stunned. "That's today!"

"She's ahead of Patricia again," a woman breathed.

"Mother!" Patricia hissed on the front bench.

"I signed it, darling," Pauline murmured, her smile not moving. "Let her have the chair. A joke with a chair is still a joke."

"Thank you, Grandmother," Serena said quietly. She looked down at the front bench. "And thank you, Aunt Pauline. For your advice. I took it."

Lady Honoria swung round on the front bench.

"Your advice, Pauline?" she said, dangerously sweet. "You advised her? Against my son?"

Pauline's knuckles went white on her little card.

The old keeper of the house came forward with the book. Nothing surprised him.

"Lady Serena," he said gravely. "Do you take this man?"

"I do," Serena said firmly.

"Your Highness. Do you take this woman?"

Alexander looked at her. For one second, his eyes weren't vague at all.

"I do," he said softly.

At the back of the hall, by the doors, one person started clapping. Small, quick hands. A grey maid's dress. Felicia, alone, clapping as hard as she could, tears on her face.

"Is that a servant?" a guest hissed, appalled. "Somebody stop her!"

"Let her be," an old man said gruffly from the third row. "She's the only one in here who means it."

"People clap at weddings, sir," Felicia said loudly, still clapping. "Didn't anybody tell you?"

Dulcie stood up, red-eyed, and clapped too. Then Gideon.

Three people, in a hall of hundreds. It sounded very small. It was the best sound Serena had ever heard.

Julian Pryce took the white flower out of his buttonhole and dropped it on the floor. "Julian!" Honoria hissed furiously. "Do something!"

"Like what, Mother?" Julian said, almost cheerful. "She looked at me for a long time, and then she chose the one who crawled. I've learned something about myself." He gave Alexander a small, crooked bow. "Congratulations, dog boy. You've bought me a week of freedom. Mother will have me back on the market by Friday." "Good luck on the market," Alexander said seriously.

"I'll need it," Julian said dryly, and walked out of the side door with his hands in his pockets.

A young servant hurried down the hall with a small leather case. "Lady Serena," he said breathlessly. "Begging your pardon. A man in a dark car left this at the front door. He said it's for the bride. Only the bride."

"From who?" Patricia asked sharply.

"There's no name, Miss Patricia. Just a card."

The Baroness held out her hand. "Give it to me."

The servant didn't move. "He said only the bride, madam," he whispered, terrified.

Slowly, the Baroness lowered her hand.

Serena opened the brass clasp. On faded blue silk lay one small round bottle with a pencilled label, almost gone.

"What is it?" Marissa asked eagerly, craning over the bench. "Is it jewellery? Is it worth anything?"

"It's a bottle, Marissa," Cordelia said, disappointed. "Somebody sent the bride a bottle."

Serena's breath stopped. She knew this bottle the way you know your own name. "Serena?" Gideon pushed through the guests, frightened. "Sweetheart, what is it?" "It's hers," Serena whispered, shaking. "Father. It's Mother's. The last one. The one she made the winter before she died. She never even named it."

She took out the stopper. One breath.

Rain on a garden. Wet stone. Her mother's hands.

The tears came, in front of the whole hall, and she didn't care.

Gideon turned slowly to the front bench.

"There were six of those bottles, Pauline," Gideon said, very low. "After the funeral.

You told me they were lost. You said the cellar flooded."

"They were damp, Gideon," Pauline said smoothly. "They spoiled. I had them taken away."

"Taken away where?" Gideon's voice shook, but it didn't stop. "Because one of them just came back through the front door."

"Well, Pauline?" the Baroness asked sharply. "Where?"

Pauline didn't answer.

Gideon didn't look away. He looked straight at her until she did.

"There's a card," Serena said, wiping her eyes. She picked it up from the silk and read it aloud.

"To the bride who chose."

Nothing else. No name.

"Who would know about Mother's bottles?" Serena whispered.

"Charles," Patricia said quickly, elhet stepping forward, bright and sure. "It must be Charles. He knows everyone at the capital auction houses. I told him about Aunt Rosalind. He's so thoughtful That's exactly the kind of thing he does."

Something warm came into the Baroness's face for the first time all morning.

"Your count," the Baroness said slowly, "has good manners."

"He has wonderful manners, Grandmother," Patricia said sweetly.

Alexander stood at the high table, mild and sleepy, saying nothing at all. He wasn't looking at the bottle. He was looking at Pauline's hands.

"To the feast!" Cordelia called brightly, clapping, to cover everything. "Come, come! Everyone to the long table!"

She took Serena's arm and steered her down the long table, all the way to the very end, by the kitchen door.

Two places. No silver. Tin forks.

"There's no napkin," Serena said quietly.

"No," Cordelia said sweetly, loud enough for the table to hear. "Dogs don't need napkins, darling."

Laughter ran up the long table like a spilled drink.

Serena looked at the tin forks. Then she looked up, past forty places, to the head of the table.

Two silver chairs stood there, high-backed, with roses carved into the arms. They had been made for her mother's wedding, twenty-two years ago. Nobody had sat in them since.

"Aunt Cordelia," Serena said politely. "Whose chairs are those?" "Those?" Cordelia laughed, a little too high. "Nobody's, darling. They're for show. They were your mother's."

"Then they're mine," Serena said.

"Darling, a wife sits with her husband," Cordelia said, sweet and firm. "And a husband with no dowry sits below the married-in men. It's the law."

"I know the law, Aunt," Serena said evenly. "I had two years to learn it through a locked door." She took her arm back. "It's my wedding."

She walked up the long table alone, past the silver and the staring faces, and pulled out the first silver chair and sat down in it. Then she pulled back the second.

"Your Highness," she said calmly. "Sit down."

The hall went quiet. Alexander looked at the chair as if it might bite him.

"Is it allowed?" he asked mildly.

"It is today," Serena said.

He sat.

"She's put the dog boy in Rosalind's chair!" a woman gasped, delighted.

"Nobody's sat in those chairs for twenty years," her neighbour whispered, shocked.

"Somebody fetch him a bowl!" Preston crowed from the family table. "He'll be lost without his bowl!"

"Then bring two, Preston," Serena said evenly. "Yours is empty too."

The young men around Preston laughed before they could stop themselves, and Preston went a dull, ugly red.

Halfway down the table, Harvey half rose, red in the face.

"But I sit above him," Harvey whispered to nobody, hurt. "I brought a shipping share.

A whole share."

"Sit down, Harvey," Pauline said coldly, without looking at him.

Harvey sat down.

"How sweet," Patricia said, loud and sugary enough to carry. "Serena's always been kind to strays."

"Thank you, Patricia," Serena said coolly, without turning her head. "I learned it from you. You've been keeping a count nobody's ever seen for a whole year." Somebody at the next table choked on their champagne.

"Gideon," Marissa whispered, thrilled and horrified. "She sat in the chairs. Are we allowed the chairs now? Do we move up?"

"I don't think it works like that, Marissa," Gideon said softly.

"Well, somebody should ask," Marissa said firmly, and didn't.

"Mother!" Cordelia hissed at the high table. "Stop her!"

"Leave her," the Baroness said dryly. "Let her sit up there. She'll find out how hard a chair can be."

Patricia was already coming up the table with two full glasses, smiling her bright, brave smile.

"You can't sit at the head with an empty hand, cousin," she said sweetly and set one glass down in front of Serena. Then she lifted the other high. "A toast! To my cousin. The bride who chose!"

"The bride who chose!" the hall echoed, laughing.

Serena lifted her glass and drank, because everyone was watching. Over the rim of her own glass, Patricia watched her drink.

She had to make sure she drank it-her specially formulated poison. She had to make sure no one threatened her position as the head of the Tiffany family.

Serena set the glass down. Her fingers stayed on the stem.

Then they began to shake.

The glass rattled against the plate, once, twice, a thin bright sound, and all down the long table, one by one, the faces turned.

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Serena pressed her hand flat on the cloth. It kept shaking.

The glass tipped. Red wine ran across the white linen, between the candles, straight toward the lace of her wedding dress.

"Serena?" Gideon was half out of his chair, his napkin crushed in one fist. "Sweetheart?"

"I'm fine, Father," she said quietly.

She wasn't. This was how the dark had started, two winters ago. First the hands. Then the eyes. Then the voice.

Not again, she thought. Not in front of all of them.

"Oh dear," Patricia said from the family table, sweet as syrup. "Is she ill? She's gone so pale." She turned in her chair. "Doctor Reeve, shouldn't she have her drops?"

Every head turned to the doctors' table. Dr. Osmond Reeve had a forkful of salmon halfway to his mouth.

"I, no," he stammered. "No. No more drops. Not tonight, Miss Patricia."

"But she's shaking," Patricia said, loud enough for the back benches. "Look at her, poor thing. After everything she's been through."

"Perhaps the excitement," Reeve said weakly.

Marissa pulled her pink coat tight around her throat. "Is it catching? Gideon, is it catching?"

"It's not catching, Marissa." Gideon's voice cracked on her name.

Under the table, a hand closed around Serena's wrist. Warm. Perfectly steady. One thumb found a spot just below the bone and pressed, once.

The shaking stopped. All at once, like a bell when someone lays a palm on it.

Serena looked sideways at her husband. He was gazing down the hall at the wedding cake, wearing his mild, empty smile.

"Nerves," Cordelia announced brightly. "Brides always shake. I shook like a leaf at mine. Didn't I, Marissa?"

"You fell into the fountain," Marissa said.

"I slipped," Cordelia snapped.

"Nerves," Serena repeated slowly. She didn't believe a word of it.

Alexander leaned across, clumsy and slow, and picked up the fallen glass.

"You've spilled, wife," he said vaguely. "I'll fix it."

On the way, the rim passed under his nose.

Violets. Faint and sweet. He had smelled them once before, on a pillow in a locked tower, the night he pulled the dark out of her.

Somebody in this hall had tried again.

His face didn't move. The glass slipped from his fingers and burst on the stone floor.

"Oh!" Cordelia shrieked. "That's the good crystal!"

"Sorry," Alexander said, wringing his hands. "Sorry. It was wet."

"It's always something with him," Preston laughed from the family table. "Somebody give the idiot a tin cup!"

A footman hovered, uncertain. "Should I fetch a tin cup, madam?"

"Fetch a broom," Cordelia said.

The footman swept up the pieces and carried them off to the kitchen bin. The violets went with them.

Patricia watched him go. For one second her face showed relief, then annoyance, then nothing at all.

At the doctors' table, Reeve had turned the colour of old candle wax.

Alexander saw both faces. He set them side by side on the list in his head.

Serena waited until the next course came and the noise rose again.

"Your hand," she said, without turning her head.

"I was holding my wife's hand at my wedding," he said innocently. "I'm told it's allowed."

"Your thumb knew exactly where to go."

"I've held a lot of frightened dogs," Alexander said mildly. "They shake like that in a storm. You press there, and they stop."

Serena turned and stared at him.

"Did you just call me a dog?"

"A very good dog," he said seriously.

For a second she looked ready to throw the salt at him. Then the corner of her mouth gave way, and she pressed her napkin over her face.

"Are you laughing?" he asked, worried.

"No," she said, into the napkin.

"Good. Because Cordelia is looking."

She lowered the napkin. Her eyes were wet, and not from crying.

"My mother kept an old Roman by her bed," she said softly. "A thin brown book of letters to a friend. Whenever I was scared of something that hadn't happened yet, she read me one line. We suffer more often in imagination than in reality."

"Was he right?"

"I thought so, for years." She looked down at her hand, quiet now on the cloth. "Tonight it was real. My hand really shook."

"And now?"

"Now I think he left something out." She took a slow breath. "It's not that nothing bad happens. It's whether somebody's there when it does."

He didn't answer. Under the table, his hand was already gone.

The toasts went on too long, the way toasts do.

Halfway through Cordelia's, which was about her own wedding, Dulcie slipped up the side of the hall in her grey dress and stopped at the silver chairs.

"Serena," she whispered. "I wanted to say thank you."

"Don't thank me," Serena said gently. "I didn't choose him for you."

"I know. Thank you anyway."

Then she turned to Alexander and went pink to the ears.

"And thank you, Your Highness. For being chosen. I mean, for being there to be chosen. I mean." She stopped, mortified. "I don't know what I mean."

"That's all right," Alexander said kindly. "I'm an idiot. I never know what I mean either."

Dulcie laughed out loud, a small startled sound, then clapped both hands over her mouth and fled back to her mother.

Serena watched her go. "I've never heard Dulcie laugh."

"Everybody laughs at me," Alexander said cheerfully. "It's my best skill."

At ten o'clock the music stopped, and Pauline rose from her chair.

"Before our guests go," she said pleasantly, "a word about the arrangements.

Serena, darling, your old rooms in the east wing have been aired. Your things are there."

"Thank you, Aunt," Serena said carefully.

"And His Highness's room is ready,"

Pauline went on, smiling. "Behind the garage. Next to the kennels. A marred in man with no dowry sleeps where the house puts him.

That's the law, and I'm sure he doesn't mind." She turned the smile on Alexander. "Do you, Your

Highness?"

Somebody snickered. Then everybody did.

"Separate rooms on the wedding night," a woman whispered, delighted. "Oh, that's cruel."

"That's the coast," her husband said.

"I don't mind," Alexander said mildly. "The dogs are good company. They never make speeches."

Preston laughed so hard he had to grip the table.

Serena set down her napkin and stood. The laughter died, one table at a time.

"Then it's ours," she said.

Pauline's smile held. "I'm sorry, darling?"

"The room behind the garage. If that's my husband's room, then it's ours." She held out her arm to him, the way a coast bride fetches her groom. "Your Highness." "She's fetching him," an old woman breathed. "Like a groom. In front of everyone." Alexander looked at her arm for a long moment. Then he rose and took it. "Serena," the Baroness said sharply from the high table. "The east wing is your right. You're in the line again. An heir does not sleep by the kennels."

"I slept two years where this house put me, Grandmother," Serena said quietly. "In a tower, behind a lock. Tonight I'll choose."

Nobody answered that.

She walked him the whole length of the great hall in her wedding white. On the third bench, Gideon got to his feet as she passed, and this time nobody had to tell him.

By the doors, Felicia was sobbing into a tablecloth.

"Prince," she choked. "I put flowers in the jar. I didn't know she'd come. I'd have put more."

"They'll be enough," Serena said.

The doors closed behind them.

"Well," Marissa said at last, into the silence. "That's one less room to heat."

On the front bench, Patricia leaned toward her mother, white around the mouth.

"She's back in the line," she hissed. "And she just walked out on you in front of the whole coast."

"Let her walk," Pauline murmured, still smiling at the guests. "A girl who sleeps by the kennels is still a joke, darling. She's only chosen which kennel." Long after midnight, Pauline sat alone in her study with the lamp turned low.

On the desk lay the evening post, and one thick envelope with no stamp and no name. Heavy cream paper. She had seen one exactly like it once before.

She slit it open with her silver knife. Banknotes, a thick fold of them, crisp and new.

And one card, in square printed letters.

He sleeps by the dogs. Keep him there.

Pauline rang the bell. Her maid shuffled in, half asleep, in a dressing gown.

"This envelope. When did it come?"

"Six this morning, madam," the maid said, stifling a yawn. "A boy brought it to the back gate. Said not to give it to you until after the wedding."

"At six," Pauline repeated. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure, madam. Cook was just lighting the ovens. I let him in myself."

"Did you see his face?"

"He had a cap on, madam. Didn't even wait for a coin." The maid hesitated. "Is something wrong?"

"Go to bed."

The maid went. A moment later Harvey put his head round the door in his nightcap.

"Pauline? Are you coming up?" He twisted the tassel of his cap. "I only ask because

I sat above him today. The whole day. And then she put him in the silver chair, and now I'm not sure where I sit."

"Go to bed, Harvey."

Harvey went.

Pauline sat very still.

At six this morning, the bride hadn't chosen anyone. If she had taken Julian Pryce, the prince would have gone to Dulcie, and he'd have been none of Pauline's business at all.

"You knew," she whispered to the card. "At six o'clock, you already knew which one she'd take."

She held it over the lamp and watched it burn. Her fingers, for the first time in many years, were not quite steady.

The room behind the garage had one bulb, two narrow beds and a tap that dripped.

Somebody, Felicia probably, had a jam jar of white flowers on the windowsill. Outside the wall, the old grey hound with the torn ear lifted his head, thumped his tail twice, and went back to sleep.

Serena stood in the doorway in her wedding dress and took it all in. She didn't cry.

"They gave us the kennels," she said flatly.

"The garage wing," Alexander corrected mildly. "Preston was very proud of the name. He thought of it himself."

"Does it bother you?"

"I've slept in worse," he said cheerfully. "This one has a window. I'm moving up in the world."

She came in and shut the door. Then she turned and studied him under the bare bulb, slowly, the way she looked at everything now, as the world might be taken from her again if she didn't learn it fast enough.

"I don't know who you are," she said. "Everybody says you're simple. You don't look simple to me. You look like a man pretending."

"Maybe I'm a simple man pretending to be clever," he said lightly.

"Maybe." She sat on the edge of the nearest bed and folded her hands in her lap.

"I'll tell you one thing, so we start honestly. They gave me to you as a joke. I don't intend to be one."

He held her gaze for a long moment.

"Neither do I," he said quietly.

"Good," Serena said.

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She looked at the two beds. One was by the window. One was by the wall, where the cold came through the bricks.

"You take the window," she said firmly.

"It's your wedding night," Alexander said, surprised. "You should have the window."

"I had a window for two years," she said quietly. "It had bars on it. I don't want to look out of one for a while." She nodded at it. "And you keep looking at it. You did it in the hall, too. Every time a door opened, you looked at the way out."

He was quiet.

"I'm not asking why," she said gently. "I'm only saying, take it."

"Thank you," he said, and meant it.

The tap dripped. Somewhere in the house, a door slammed, and somebody laughed, a long way off.

"I'll fix that tomorrow," Serena said briskly, nodding at the tap.

"You can fix taps?" he asked, surprised.

"I spent two years in a tower listening to one," she said dryly. "I know exactly what's wrong with it. The washer's gone, and somebody tightened it too hard to hide it."

"That sounds like this house," Alexander said mildly.

She almost laughed. She caught it just in time.

"Can I tell you my trouble?" she asked, hesitant. "Since we're starting honestly."

"Please," he said softly.

"There's talk in the trade," Serena said, low. "My father hears things in this house. Nobody ever notices he's in the room. Halcyon Group is buying one perfume house on this coast. Only one. Whoever they pick will be rich for twenty years. Whoever they don't will be finished."

"And the house will send you?" he asked.

"No." Her mouth went thin. "The house will send Patricia. And Patricia will send my notebooks."

He waited.

"Tonight," Serena said, "at the feast, I could smell my own work. On the guests. A green fig and a cold iron note I made blind, in the tower, two winters ago. I wrote it in my notebook by feel. Four women at that table were wearing it." Her hands tightened in her lap. "It's called Patricia's Garden now. It sells in the capital."

"She took it from your room," Alexander said, very low.

"She took everything from my room. Grandmother says the notebooks come back tomorrow." Serena looked at him. "Some of them won't. You'll see."

"What will you do?" he asked, curious.

"Make something new," she said fiercely. "Something she's never smelled. And make it so well she can't copy it in time."

He didn't say anything for a while.

"Can I ask you something?" he said at last, careful.

"You can ask," she said warily.

"Why did you choose me?" Alexander asked quietly. "Julian was a better bargain. Everyone said so. Even Julian."

Serena looked at the jam jar on the windowsill for a long time.

"Let say, my heart chooses you without my mind know the reason."

"You are going to regret it." Alexander said.

"So far, my heart is happy with you."

“All newlyweds are blissfully happy during the first month—ask them again in ten years."

She laughed. It burst out of her, rusty and surprised, and she clapped a hand over her mouth and looked at him over it with narrowed eyes.

"You do that on purpose," she said, accusing.

"Do what?" he asked innocently.

"Make me laugh, then look innocent," she said.

"I'm an idiot," he said humbly. "I can't do anything on purpose."

"Hm." She didn't believe him. He could see her not believing him. Then she breathed in, without meaning to, and frowned. "You smell like a ship."

"I came on one," he said mildly.

"No," she said slowly. "Not like that. Like a ship's wood. Cedar, and salt." She was watching him very carefully now. "I've smelled that before."

"Everybody on Harland smells like that," Alexander said. "It's the boats," he added cheerfully. "The whole island's made of them."

"Is it?" she asked softly.

"Goodnight, wife," he said gently.

She held his eyes a moment longer. Then she lay back on the bed by the wall, still in her wedding dress, and turned her face to the bricks.

"Goodnight, husband," said Serena.

He waited until her breathing slowed.

Then he went out into the yard, quietly, so the hound only opened one eye.

On the other side of the house, in the Baroness's study, Julian Pryce was finding out what he had signed.

He had walked out of the hall that afternoon with his hands in his pockets. Back on the market by Friday, he'd said. He had believed it.

Now he stood in front of the Baroness's desk with his mother beside him, and the lamp lit a sheet of heavy cream paper between them.

"This is absurd," Honoria said, pink to the roots of her hair. "Imelda, he walked out. The whole coast saw him walk out. There was no wedding. He never said I do."

"He didn't need to." The Baroness turned the paper round so they could read it. "Read it, Honoria. You wrote half of it."

It was the marriage agreement. The coast form, the old one, on the thick paper with the Tiffany crest at the top and the magistrate's red seal at the bottom.

The Baroness put her thin finger on the first line and read it out, flat and dry, like a clerk.

"The house of Pryce gives Lord Julian Pryce in marriage to a granddaughter of the house of

Tiffany, of age and unmarried, amet named below on the day of the choosing. The Pryce dowry is paid on signing and is not returned, unless the marriage be unmade." Her finger moved down. "Signed, Julian Pryce. Eight o'clock this morning. Witnessed, Honoria Pryce.

Witnessed, Pauline Tiffany."

"I signed it for Serena," Julian said sharply. "Everyone knew it was for Serena.

Mother said it was a formality. You said yourself she'd choose me."

"Then you should have read it." The Baroness's finger moved again. "As named below. Look below, Lord Julian."

He looked.

Under his own careless signature there was a second line, in the Baroness's sharp, upright hand: Dulcie Tiffany. And under that, small and shaky, the girl's own name, signed so hard the pen had nearly gone through the paper.

"She signed it at four o'clock," the Baroness said. "In this room. After the choosing. Her mother held her hand still."

"She was forced!" Honoria cried.

"The law doesn't ask why." The Baroness laid her palm flat on the paper. "Both names. Two witnesses. The dowry paid into my bank at nine this morning And the magistrate's clerk was in my half all afternooŤ eating my cake, and he sealed it at five."

She looked up. "On this coast, the paper is the marriage. The chapel is for the neighbours. Your son walked out of a party, Honoria. He didn't walk out of a wedding. He's been Dulcie's husband since five o'clock."

Julian stared at the red seal.

"I'll go to the magistrate myself," he said. "I'll have it torn up."

"On what grounds? You signed it sober, in daylight, in front of your mother." The

Baroness smiled thinly. "There's only one way out of that paper, and it isn't the magistrate."

"Then what is it?" Julian demanded.

The old woman leaned back in her chair and looked at him the way she looked at a bad account.

"Unless the marriage be unmade," she said.

"The last line, Lord Julian. The law on this coast is old. A marriage that isn't a marriage by morning can be undone. Paper burned. Dowry sent back." She folded her hands.

"Your money is in my bank, and I'd like to keep it. But I won't beg a Pryce. So go up to that room and try. You do not make love with my granddaughter. If nothing has happened by breakfast, I'll return every penny tomorrow."

Julian went white, then red.

"That's blackmail, Baroness."

"That's business," she said. "Honoria, take your son upstairs. Goodnight, Lord Julian. There's champagne on the dresser. Let see what your choice is."

Honoria took his arm. At the door, she leaned close and hissed in his ear.

a"If you run to the magistrate now, our name will be a laughingstock for the next two decades. Go up those stairs Julian But hear me do not durian.sineart a finger on that woman if you want this union dissolved. One touch-a single consummation—and it is sealed by law. Consider your next move very carefully."

Julian swallowed hard.

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Dulcie was already in the bridal room when he got there.

She was sitting on the very edge of the big bed in her grey dress, with her hands knotted in her lap. She had stopped crying. Her eyes were red and dry.

Julian leaned in the doorway. He had meant to be kind. He had meant to say, Don't worry, little cousin, I won't touch you, and sleep in the chair, and go home in the morning.

"Don't be frightened," he said. "I'm not going to

"I know what I'm meant to do," Dulcie said.

Her voice was very small and very flat, like a lesson read out loud.

"Mother told me. And Grandmother." She stood up. Her hands went to the hooks at the front of her grey dress, and they were shaking so hard she missed the first one. "If you send the money back, I've failed the house. And if I fail, Grandmother says I go down to the garage wing. To wait on the prince and his wife. A maid, for the rest of my life, in the kennels."

She undid the first hook. Then the second.

"This is her fault," Dulcie whispered, not to him. To the floor. "Serena's. She could have taken you. She looked right at you. And she walked past you to that idiot, so the whole coast would watch her do it." Her mouth shook. "And now I'm the one who pays."

Julian looked at her in the lamplight. Nineteen. Pale hair coming down her back. Not as pretty as Serena. Nobody was. But young, and frightened, and his, by paper and by law.

And somewhere in this house, Serena was lying in a garage with a dog boy, because she had looked Julian Pryce in the face in front of the whole coast and walked on.

"I am not sleeping with you, Dulcie!" Julian snapped, taking a step back.

Her eyes brimmed with hurt. "Why not? Am I not desirable enough? Am I truly that repulsive to you? Why is everyone in this house so cruel?"

“Because Serena is the one I love!” Julian ran a tense hand through his hair. "This marriage is a farce. We were forced into this corner, Dulcie. Let's just make it through the night without complicating things."

Dulcie took a step toward him, her fingers catching the hem of her gown. "Then test the waters first. You can always divorce me if I don't live up to your expectations. We're already legally married anyway. Tell me there isn't a part of you that wants this."

Without breaking eye contact, she let her clothes slip to the floor, leaving only the sheer, intricate lingerie she had saved for their wedding night.

Julian went to the dresser. The champagne was cold. He poured one glass and drank it. Then another.

By the third, the room was warm, and his blood was warmer, and the little voice telling him to sleep in the chair had gone very quiet.

Well, he thought. I'm drunk. I'm married. I wanted a wife who'd make Serena sorry. Why not this one?

If he got bored, there was always divorce. That was what divorce was for.

He put down the glass and shut the door.

Drunk minds, however, tend to overlook the legalities: a divorce meant forfeiting at least half the dowry, if not the entire fortune, depending entirely on whether anyone had bothered to read the fine print.

At breakfast the next morning, the long dining room was very quiet.

Everyone had heard. The heir in the line had slept by the kennels. Nobody knew whether to laugh or not, so nobody did.

Serena came in at eight, in a plain dress, with her hair pinned up, and sat in her place as if nothing had happened. Alexander came in behind her with a bowl of scraps for the dogs and went out the other door.

"Good morning, Grandmother," Serena said calmly.

The Baroness didn't answer. She was holding a heavy cream envelope, sealed in blue wax, and turning it over in her thin fingers.

"This came at seven," she said coldly. "From the capital."

"From who, Mother?" Cordelia asked, leaning in.

The Baroness broke the seal and read it in silence. Then she read it again, out loud, slowly.

"Halcyon Group will take one perfume house on this coast as its partner. One house. Each house may send one nose. On Friday, in front of our panel, each nose has one hour to make a perfume from nothing."

She folded the letter.

"And whoever wins it for this house," the Baroness said, "directs Tiffany Perfumes. Whoever that is."

Nobody spoke. Nobody even put down a cup.

Across the table, Serena felt the back of her neck go cold.

At the far end, Patricia lowered her napkin. Then, very slowly, she smiled.

"Well?" the Baroness said coldly. "Who goes for this house?"

Nobody moved. Silver hung over plates. The grey morning light lay on the long table, on the cream envelope, on the blue wax broken in two.

"Patricia, of course," Cordelia said brightly at last. "Who else? She's the only one of us with a nose. Her Garden sells in the capital! She is the best of us."

Every head turned to Patricia.

For one second, Patricia looked startled.

One hour. From nothing. In front of Halcyon's panel, with every great nose on the coast watching her hands.

Then she remembered the drawer of her dressing table, and the three blue notebooks lying under her stockings, wrapped in a silk scarf.

Rosalind's last three years. Every formula written out, gram by gram, in that quick, neat hand.

She wouldn't have to make anything from nothing. She'd only have to read.

Patricia rose, smooth and lovely, in the grey light.

"I'll go, Grandmother," she said. "I'll bring that partnership home to this table myself."

"Good," the Baroness said, and reached for the pen.

"No," Serena said.

The pen stopped.

Serena stood up. She pressed both hands flat on the tablecloth so nobody would see them shake.

"I'll go for this house, Grandmother," she said. "Not Patricia."

Patricia didn't even turn her head. "Sit down, Serena."

"No."

"You were in a tower until this week," Patricia said, still looking at the Baroness. "You can't find the stairs without counting them. Sit down before you embarrass yourself."

"I made perfume in that tower," Serena said. "Every day. In the dark. By feel."

"With what?

Rainwater and a candle?" Now Patricia turned. "Halcyon is a laboratory, darling. They want a nose that's worked. Mine has. My Garden sells in the capital. Four women wore it to your wedding."

"I know," Serena said. "I made it."

Cordelia's spoon hit her saucer.

"How dare you," Cordelia hissed. "At this table. After everything this family did for you."

"You locked me in a tower, Aunt Cordelia," Serena said. "I remember everything this family did for me."

"Funny how can it be yours?" Patricia said quietly.

"Green fig. And a cold iron note under it. I made it blind, two winters ago, and wrote it in my notebook. My notebook. In my room." Serena didn't blink. "You put your name on it."

"Mother!" Pauline's voice turned venomous. "The girl has lost her mind! The moment her vision returned, the first thing she did was sneak into my daughter's room and steal her formula book!"

A quiet, steady voice cut through the outrage. "My mind is perfectly sound, Aunt Pauline."

"She smells something she likes and thinks it's hers," Pauline said to the Baroness. "Two years alone does that. We should have a doctor in. Today."

"Why pay a doctor?" Preston drawled. "Put her back in the tower, Grandmother. It's cheaper. She was quiet up there."

The cousins laughed. Down the table, nobody told him to stop.

"Then ask her," Serena said. She was looking only at Patricia. "Ask her what the iron is."

"I don't answer to you."

"What's the iron, Patricia?"

"Blackcurrant bud," Patricia snapped. "Crushed, cut with a mineral accord. Every perfumer on the coast knows it."

"It's a rusted nail," Serena said. "I left it in rainwater on the tower sill for a month, because I had nothing else That's why it smells cold." She leaned in across the table. "You've worn it for a year, and you never once wondered why." .net

The room didn't breathe.

Patricia went white, then red. She came round the end of the long table, fast, her heels cracking on the boards, and stopped so close to Serena their skirts touched.

"You liar," she said, low and shaking. "You crawled out of that tower yesterday, you married the dog boy, and now you want my life. My name. My work. Everything I built while you were sitting in the dark."

"While I was locked in the dark," Serena said. "By your mother."

Pauline stood up so fast her chair went over.

"How dare you -"

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 799

The knock came after dark. Three hard knocks, quick and careless.

Not his. Her husband knocked twice, soft, then a third time, a little late, as if he was sorry to bother the door.

Serena sat on the bed by the wall with the black envelope in her lap.

The kennels breathed through the bricks behind her, warm straw and wet fur. A hound snored. The card had gone warm from her hands.

"Who is it?" she called warily.

"Your future, cousin," a lazy voice drawled through the wood. "Open up. It's cold out here, and I'm wearing my good coat."

Julian Pryce.

She slid the envelope under the pillow and opened the door four inches.

He leaned on the frame, handsome in a smooth, polished way. Brandy on his breath. Night frost on the shoulders of his camel coat.

"You're lost," Serena said flatly. "The guest wing is on the other side of the house."

"I know where the guest wing is," Julian said, amused. "I've come to rescue you from this one." He looked past her at the bare bulb and the two narrow beds, and laughed softly. "Good heavens. They really did it. Is that a tap or a weapon?"

"It's a tap," she said coolly. "It works now."

"Then it's the only thing down here that does." He shook his head, almost fond, and the cold night air came in around him and stung her bare ankles. "I heard about breakfast, Serena. Out of the line. Patricia going to Halcyon on Friday with your name nowhere on the paper. That's a hard morning, even for you."

"Get to it, Julian."

"Fine." He straightened, and his voice went smooth and reasonable, the voice of a man selling a horse.

"You know what the Pryces are worth now. My mother's dowry is sitting in your grandmother's bank. And by Monday, Halcyon takes the Pryce Lake Hotel into its new chain. My mother has it from the chairman's own people. Once Halcyon owns a piece of our lake, Halcyon owes the Pryces."

He smiled. "So one word from me, and on Friday you stand at a bench beside Patricia. A title. A salary."

"A title," Serena said dryly. "Doing what? Holding her bottles?"

"Holding whatever she hands you, at first. Everyone starts somewhere."

She breathed in. Brandy. Wool. Something sour underneath, like milk left in the sun.

"And the price?" she asked quietly.

Julian smiled. He had been waiting for that.

"When I call," he said lightly, "you come up to the guest wing. Now and then. Quietly. You'd be surprised how many great houses on this coast work exactly that way."

The cold came through the bricks and into her shoulders.

Years ago, before the dark, boys like Julian had used to bring her flowers at the spring fairs and stammer. She had been Rosalind's daughter then, the best young nose in Westmere. Now one of them stood at a kennel door and named a price.

"Lord Julian!"

A lamp came bobbing across the black yard. Yellow hair. A glass of sherry in her other hand, somehow, even now. In two years Cordelia had never once come down to the garage wing. She had always said the smell got into her hair.

"I thought I heard your voice!" Cordelia cried breathlessly. "My son-in-law! A Pryce! Standing in the cold like a tradesman! Serena, for shame, let him in."

"He's not coming in, Aunt," Serena said evenly.

"Don't be silly, darling." Cordelia beamed up at Julian. "He's family."

"I was making Serena an offer," Julian said smoothly.

"Oh, you generous boy!" Then Cordelia's bright eyes went past Serena, into the room, and stopped on the pillow. A corner of black paper showed under it. Silver ink.

"What's that?" she asked sharply. "Who's writing to you? Nobody writes to you. Nobody's written to you in two years."

"Nothing that's yours," Serena said.

"Did somebody call me?"

The voice came out of the dark behind them, mild and a little out of breath.

Alex came in from the kennels with a tin bowl of scraps, in his old Harland coat, salt- stiff and torn along one sleeve, wearing his mild, empty smile.

The old grey hound with the torn ear trotted at his heel and sat when he stopped.

Julian didn't look at him. He looked through him, the way a man looks through a puddle on his way to a carriage.

"Did I hear Halcyon?" Alex asked, wide-eyed. "The big company with the ship? Even I've heard of Halcyon. They're really taking your lake?"

Julian finally turned his head, slowly, as if a chair had spoken. The hound's breath went hot and low in its throat.

"Halcyon begs for the lake," he said, bored. "Every great house on this coast wants into Halcyon, and Halcyon wants the lake. By Monday it's signed. Not that a man like you would understand a contract if it bit him."

"Goodness," Alex said, impressed. "Monday."

"Monday." Julian looked him up and down, and wrinkled his nose at the smell of the kennels. "Tell me, cousin. Does it bark?"

"Only at strangers, my lord," Alex said politely. "You're not a stranger. You're family now. Dulcie's husband."

The word landed. Julian's smile stayed where it was, but it went thin at the edges.

"I'm an idiot," Alex added apologetically. "Everybody says so." He held out the bowl, helpful. "Would you like some, my lord? They're very good scraps. Lady Cordelia's roast."

Cordelia stared at the bowl in horror.

"That was my dinner!" she squeaked.

"You left the fat," Alex said kindly. "The dogs were very grateful. They asked me to tell you."

The hound thumped its tail on the stones, as if to agree.

"Did your nanny teach you to talk like that," Julian asked coldly, "or the dogs?"

"The dogs," Alex said seriously. "They're very patient teachers. They only bite once."

A small laugh got out of Serena before she could stop it, sharp in the cold air.

Julian turned back to her as if the idiot had never spoken.

"Look at him, Serena," he said softly. "Really look frog at the bottom of a well, croaking at the sky. He'll never give you anything but flean et and acot. Leave him in his kennel. Last Chance On Friday you walk into Hafcyon with a title, or you stay out here and watch Patricia walk in wearing your work. I won't ask twice. Pryces never do."

Serena looked at him for a long moment. The wet straw gave off its warm, sour smell.

Then she opened the door all the way, so the bulb lit his face, and her husband's, and Cordelia's lamp.

"You're my cousin's husband now, Julian," she said clearly. "Go home to her. I'II keep mine." She took one step forward. "And don't you ever speak to my husband like that again. He isn't a frog. He's my husband."

Silence.

Julian's face went white. Then red, all the way up to his smooth, polished hair.

Cordelia's hand jerked, and the glass cover slid off her lamp and smashed on the stones.

"Oh!" she wailed. "That's the good glass!"

"You'll regret this," Julian said, very low. "Every morning, when you wake up on that cot and smell the dogs, you'll remember that I stood at this door and offered you a way out."

"I regret two whole years," Serena said steadily. "This won't make the list."

"On Friday you'll beg."

"On Friday," Serena said, "I'll be busy."

Julian turned on his heel and walked off into the dark.

Cordelia rounded on Alex with the broken lamp shaking in her hand.

"You!" she hissed. "A lord came to this door, and you offered him dog food! You drag her down to the

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bottom with you, you useless, grinning thing. Thope Patricia puts you both in the rain." And she hurried after Julian, calling his name in a high, sorry voice. Content

Alex took the bowl out to the pump. In the dark by the kennels he took out his phone. Julian had just boasted of the lake to the one man who owned Halcyon.

He typed one line to a number with no name.

The Pryce Lake Hotel. Decline it. Permanently.

Serena shut the door and leaned her back against it. Her hands were shaking, the way hands shake when you have finally said the thing.

"You laughed," Alex said, coming back in and setting the bowl down. "At the roast."

"I didn't," she said firmly.

"You did. A small one. I heard it."

"Stop calling yourself an idiot in front of him. He'll believe you."

"Everybody believes me," Alex said mildly. "It's my only talent."

He went to the tap and rinsed the bowl. Cold water rang in the tin.

Her mother had used to read her an old teacher at bedtime, a man who had been born a slave and spent his whole life telling free men that they weren't.

"No man is free who is not master of himself," Serena said softly, to the wall.

Alex looked round, curious. "Your mother said that?"

"An old teacher said it. My mother read him on bad nights." She looked down at her hands. "Julian offered me a bench and a title, and for one second, I wanted it. That's what frightens me. Not him. The second."

"But you said no."

"I said no." She lifted her chin. "No man is free, and no woman either, if she sells herself for a bench. Not for a title. Not for anything he's got."

She took the black envelope from under the pillow. The cedar was still on it, and the salt, the same as at dusk. On their wedding night he had told her that everybody on Harland smelled like that, because of the boats. She hadn't believed him then. She believed him less now.

"Did anyone come by today?" she asked carefully. "While I was at breakfast."

"The dogs," Alex said seriously. "And a cat. The cat didn't stay."

"Nobody else?"

He turned round, the bowl in his hands, his face open and puzzled. "Should someone have?"

She opened her mouth to ask. Then she closed it. If she asked, and he answered, and someone in this house had an ear to the wall, then whatever he was would be taken, the way this house had taken everything she had ever made.

"No reason," she said quietly.

"Ask anything," Alex said cheerfully. "I hardly ever know the answer."

She turned the laugh into a cough. He pretended not to hear it.

The second knock came later, when the yard had gone quiet and cold enough to fog the window. Two flat raps, exactly the same, like a ruler on a desk.

Pauline stood in the yard, tall, in grey, a white card in her hand. Behind her, holding the broken lamp, Cordelia looked very pleased with herself.

For two years Pauline had kept the key to the tower, and turned it twice every night. Serena had learned that sound in the dark the way other girls learned songs. "Darling." Pauline's voice was pleasant, a menu read to a child. Her eyes went to the pillow and stayed there. "Your aunt tells me you've had a letter. A black one." "It's addressed to me."

"Everything in this house is addressed to your grandmother, in the end," Pauline said gently. "The hall. Eight o'clock. Bring the envelope. She wants to hear it said. Out loud. In front of everyone."

She turned to go. Then she looked once at Alex, sitting on the floor, scratching the old hound behind its torn ear.

"And bring the dog boy."

"He has a name," Serena said sharply.

"So does the dog, darling," Pauline said softly. "Bring him too. He's part of the joke."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 800

At eight o'clock the black envelope lay on the white cloth in front of the Baroness, and nobody at the long table had touched their toast.

The Baroness had ordered breakfast laid in the great hall this morning, not the dining room, and everyone knew why. For two hundred years Tiffany brides had stood in this hall to speak their choice, and the Baroness had always kept her hardest words for it. The hall smelled of cold butter and coffee gone bitter in the pot. Grey light lay on the silver chairs.

Serena stood at the foot of the table. Her husband stood one step behind her, in his old Harland coat, with his hands folded like a boy called up in front of the class.

The Baroness picked up the card with two thin fingers and read it out loud, flat and dry.

"Halcyon Group requests the presence of Serena Tiffany on Friday, in her own name, as an independent nose. One bench has been held for her. It will not be held for anyone else."

She put it down.

Then Patricia laughed. Bright and sweet, the way she laughed at weddings.

"An independent nose?" she said, delighted, looking round the table for company. "Independent of what, darling? Soap? Halcyon is a laboratory. They want a perfumer with a house behind her. You've got a kennel and a tin fork."

The cousins laughed. Preston slapped the table and barked, once, like a dog, and they laughed harder.

"Laugh," Serena said quietly. "You laughed for two years. You've had the practice. Go on. I'll wait."

"Oh, she bites now," Patricia said sweetly. "Somebody taught her. Was it the dogs, darling, or the idiot?"

"Who sent it?" the Baroness asked, ignoring the noise. "There's no name."

"I don't know, Grandmother," Serena said evenly. That was true. Mostly. She didn't let herself look back at her husband.

"A stranger holds a bench for you at the richest company on this coast, and you don't know who," the old woman said. "Then you're either a liar or a fool. I haven't decided which."

Julian laughed from halfway down the table. Only days ago he had been the man Serena was meant to marry. He had walked out of this same hall when she chose the dog boy instead, and he had never forgiven either of them. He sat beside Dulcie with his legs stretched out, and the smell of his hot coffee and last night's brandy drifted down the table.

"She's not a fool, Grandmother. She's proud," he drawled. "I went down to that kennel last night out of pure kindness. I offered her a title on Patricia's team. She threw it in my face. So, no. The Pryces won't be sponsoring Serena. We don't offer twice."

Cordelia beamed at him over her sherry as if he had invented money.

"And by Monday," Julian went on comfortably, "Halcyon takes the Pryce Lake Hotel into its new chain. My mother has it from the chairman's own people. Every great house on this coast wants into Halcyon, and Halcyon wants the lake." He lifted his cup toward Serena like a toast. "Everyone wants the lake, cousin. Except you." "Monday," Alex

agreed, nodding helpfully. "You told me too, my lord. At the kennel." "Nobody asked you," Julian said. "You smell of dogs. Stand further back."

"Yes, my lord," Alex said, and took one small step back, into the cold draught from the door.

The side door opened. A footman came in with a silver tray and one cream envelope on it, and bowed it toward Lord Julian. The second post, forwarded from the lake. A small silver ship was pressed into the corner of the seal.

"Halcyon," Julian said, pleased. "That was quick. Shall I read it to the kennel?"

He broke the seal with his thumb and read it out lazily, for the whole table. "Halcyon Group thanks the Pryce Lake Hotel for its application to join the Halcyon chain." His voice slowed. "The application is declined. Halcyon will not consider it again. Permanently. No reason is given."

He stopped. He read it again, silently, his lips moving.

The colour went out of his smooth face all at once, like a lamp turned down. The whole long table went quiet. Even Preston. Cordelia's sherry glass tilted, forgotten, and dripped sticky and sweet onto the white cloth.

"That's a mistake," Julian said. His voice had lost its laziness. "It's a clerk. Some silly clerk." Then, too loud: "Mother will call them today, and they'll apologise, and they'll take the lake. Everyone takes the lake."

Nobody answered him.

Serena looked down at her own hands on the back of the empty chair in front of her. She didn't smile. It was very hard not to.

"Is something funny, Serena?" Patricia asked sharply.

"No," Serena said. "I was thinking about lakes. How everybody wants them. Until they don't."

The coffee had gone cold and bitter in her cup. Somebody had held a bench for her. Somebody had just closed a door on the lake. Same ship. Same silver mark. Behind her, her husband shifted his weight, a man getting more comfortable.

The Baroness looked at the black card. She looked at the cream letter crushed in Julian's fist. Then she looked at Serena for a long time, the way she looked at an account that had come out a different number than she'd expected. She had run the House of Tiffany for longer than anyone at the table had been alive, and she had never once let a letter on her own table go unexplained.

"Two letters from Halcyon in one morning," the old woman said slowly. "One holds a bench for my granddaughter. One shuts a door on the Pryces. I don't like not knowing things in my own house." She tapped the black card with one cold finger. "But Halcyon chooses one house on this coast. One. If two Tiffanys stand in that laboratory on Friday, whichever one wins, it's still a Tiffany. My name. My bank. I'd be a fool to stop her. Let her go."

"Grandmother!" Patricia was on her feet. "You signed my name yesterday. You said Patricia goes. And now a blind girl with a dog walks in with a black letter that smells of the sea, and you just let her?"

"She isn't blind any more," the Baroness said. "That's rather the point." Patricia's hands were shaking on the cloth. Across the table Serena could smell her: green fig, and the cold iron under it. Her own winter, on her cousin's wrists. Patricia had worn that scent at every party for two years and called it her own. Then, slowly, Patricia's hands stopped.

"Fine," Patricia said softly. "Then let's make it worth something. What I told you in the corridor, I'll say in the hall, in front of everyone." She looked straight down the table. "If I win, she and the dog boy leave this house. By the front gate. On Friday night. In the rain. And they never come back."

There was a single, loud clap.

Every head turned. Alex stood behind Serena with his hands together, pleased and polite, as if someone had made a very good speech at dinner.

"He thinks it's a toast," Patricia said, appalled. "Grandmother, he's clapping for his own eviction."

Preston snorted coffee up his nose and had to be slapped on the back.

"Sorry," Alex said. "It sounded like a toast." He tilted his head, honestly puzzled. "But what if Serena wins? Does Patricia go out in the rain too?"

The table laughed at him. Patricia laughed loudest.

"If she wins, idiot? She won't."

Serena didn't laugh. Something cold and steady was moving in her chest.

Her mother had kept an old poet of Rome above her workbench, a book about a man who carried his father out of a burning city. One line was underlined twice.

"Fortune favours the bold," Serena said quietly.

"What?" Patricia snapped.

"Something my mother underlined." Serena let go of the chair. "Fortune never once.came up the tower stairs, Patricia. Two years, and inet never knocked. So I'm going down to it. If Nose to you, I'll go. Out of the gate in the rain, the way you want. But if you lose tome, you kneel on this floor. In front of everyone at this table. And you say who made it."

The room went still. Somewhere down the table a spoon touched a saucer, very softly, and everyone heard it.

For two years Patricia had stood in the garden under the tower window on Sundays, loud and happy, telling her friends how well the Garden was selling. Everybody at this table remembered.

"Who made what?" Patricia said, too quickly.

"You know what."

For one second Patricia's eyes went flat and frightened, the way they had in the cold corridor. Then her chin came up.

"I don't make promises to people who sleep with dogs."

"Then you're afraid," Serena said.

"I'm afraid of nothing you've got!"

"Then it costs you nothing to say it."

"Done," she said, and her breath came quick and hot. "I accept. Grandmother, you heard her. Every word."

"Grandmother," Alex said politely, raising one hand like a boy at school, "what happens if somebody takes it back afterwards? On Saturday. When they're cold and wet and sad."

"Nobody takes back a word spoken in this hall, you fool," Patricia said scornfully. "Even you should know that."

"Then I'll remember it," Alex said happily. "I like rules. They're easy to remember."

"Is that all you're good for?" Patricia asked. "Remembering?"

"And clapping," Alex said. "Everyone says I clap very well."

The cousins snorted.

The Baroness put her hand flat on the table, on the black card and the cold white cloth.

"In this hall a Tiffany bride speaks her choice once," the old woman said. "It has been the law of this house for two hundred years, and 1 have never once let it bend. Today I make it wider. What is spoken in this half is spoken once. Whoever takes it back leaves this house the same day. "Hereyes went from one granddaughter to the other. "No tears on Friday. No lawyers. No running to your mothers."

"There won't be any tears," Patricia said coolly. "Not mine."

"Then you won't mind the floor," Serena said.

"And you, girl," the Baroness said. "If you lose, you go with nothing. Not a bottle. Not a coat. Not one of your mother's notebooks."

"I don't have her notebooks, Grandmother," Serena said steadily. "Three of them are already missing. Ask Aunt Pauline where the cellar flooded."

Down the table, Pauline set her cup down without a sound.

The Baroness rapped her ebony cane on the floorboards, once. The sound rang up into the old beams.

"Then it is spoken," she said.

Chairs scraped. Julian went out first, the letter crushed in his fist, without waiting for his wife. Dulsie stared after him with red eyes, and then she looked down the table at Serena, and her look was pure hate.

At the window, Patricia stood with her back to the room, looking out at the low grey clouds over the garden. The glass was cold and beaded with damp.

"Look at that sky," she said lightly, to nobody. She smiled at her own reflection. "I hope it rains."