The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 811

Nobody in the ballroom breathed.

Natasha picked up the folders, both of them, and held them against her chest like a schoolbook.

"The House of Tiffany punished Miss Serena Tiffany tonight," she said. "Before the whole coast. It told us it will not have her. It told us Patricia is its head."

She looked down at the Baroness on the step.

"So this meeting is over. Halcyon will never work with the House of Tiffany again. Not this year. Not ever." A small, cold pause. "I am sorry. But Halcyon does not get played."

The Baroness's mouth opened. Nothing came out.

Natasha lifted the folders a little higher, so the back of the room could see them.

"Tomorrow, I will sell these loans. To anyone on this coast who wants the Tiffanys and the Pryces finished." Her eyes went slowly round the tables. "I think I'll have a long line."

Nobody laughed. Half the room looked down at their plates, because half the room had wanted exactly that for years.

"By tomorrow night," Natasha said, "I want to see them lose everything. The house. The name. Nothing left to start again with."

The Baroness got up.

It took her two tries. Her cane was at the bottom of the stairs, and nobody brought it to her. She caught Natasha's sleeve with one shaking hand.

"Ms. Vale. Please." Her voice cracked down the middle. "Three hundred years. Please don't do this. I am asking you. I am begging you."

Natasha looked at the hand on her sleeve as if a bird had dropped something on it.

"Who do you think you are?"

The Baroness let go.

"An hour ago you told this whole room that Halcyon could not sign without your house." Natasha smoothed her sleeve. "I want to destroy you. Who says I can't?"

She walked down the steps.

"A house of bitches like yours," she said, without turning round, "is better off on the street."

The great doors closed behind her.

Outside, a car engine started, and drove away.

The Baroness stood on the podium with the whole coast staring at her, and in her head Natasha's voice said it again, flat as a bill.

As a gift. For Miss Serena Tiffany.

She turned toward the doors where her granddaughter had gone.

The rain came off the sea in long cold sheets.

Serena sat on the low wall above the beach with her arms around her knees. Her best dress was soaked through. She was not crying. She was counting the waves.

A jacket came down over her shoulders.

It was warm. It smelled of the kennel and the coal stove.

"Being the face of that house isn't a treasure, wife," Alex said, and sat down beside her on the wet stone. "And they shouldn't treat you like that. Nobody should." She stopped counting.

"You don't understand." Her voice was very small. "It was never the contract. It was my mother's name. Just once, I wanted my father to lift his eyes at that table. Just once."

Then the tears came, all at once, the way rain comes off the sea.

Alex let her cry. He looked out at the black water, very calm, like a man waiting for a bus he knew was coming.

"Grandmother will come out in the rain," he said, "and say please. I'll bet you my jacket."

"You don't have a jacket. I'm wearing it."

"Then I'll bet you the dog."

Something that was almost a laugh broke through her crying. She hit his arm, weakly.

"I don't want dog.""

"Then, what do you want?"

"Leave me alone, Alex."

"I can't. You've got my jacket."

Behind them, the great doors of the Grand burst open.

The light poured down the steps, and the coast poured after it. Guests in silk and black ties crowded out under the awning to watch. Down the steps, into the rain, came the Baroness with no cane, holding the rail, and Patricia ran ahead of her, white as her own silk.

The Baroness stopped at the bottom of the steps, out of breath, the rain running off her pearls.

She did not beg. Not yet.

"Get up," she said. "Call Ms. Vale. Now."

Serena did not move.

Patricia reached her first and stood over her, shaking.

"When Grandmother tells you to stand, you get on your feet, you bitch!"

After a long silence, Serena finally spoke. "I don't want this family anymore. Starting today, I am no longer a Tiffany."

Grandmother Tiffany's face drained of color, her arrogance vanishing in an instant. If Serena walked out that door, the House of Tiffany would be out on the streets- every last one of them.

"You did this," she hissed. "You whispered in Halcyon's ear. You told them to humiliate me in front of everyone. Fix it, or I swear I'll—"

The Baroness slapped her.

The crack carried all the way up the steps. A woman under the awning gasped.

"You will not speak to her like that." The Baroness was shaking. "She is the head of this house's work with Halcyon. Do you hear me? She is."

Mouth parted in disbelief, Patricia stared at her grandmother, clutching her burning cheek.

"You promised me," she whispered. "You announced to everyone that I was the head of House Tiffany."

"That's over now. And you will never hold that title!"

Swallowing her words, Patricia slowly backed away into the rain.

The Baroness looked down at Serena on the wall.

Her face did something Alex had never seen it do. It broke.

"Serena." Her voice cracked. "Every loan this house has is called by morning. Halcyon holds them all.

And they say they hold them set you." She took one step closer, into the wet gravel, in front of the whole coast. "Your grandmother is begging you."

The rain hissed on the stones.

Serena looked up at her for a long time. Then she looked at Alex.

He shrugged.

"I told you," he said. "Now I keep the dog."

She stared at him.

"Your face is a terrible mess," he added kindly. "The best nose in Westmere, and it's running."

Serena wiped her face with the back of her hand. Her cheeks went red, and not from the cold.

Then she took out her phone.

Every face on the steps went still. She dialed, and put it on speaker so they could all hear, because she did not trust this house to believe anything it had not heard.

It rang twice.

"Natasha Vale."

"Ms. Vale, it's Serena Tiffany." Her voice shook once, then held. "My grandmother asked me to call. If le take the head of the house's work with Halcyon, and sign my own name, will you give us one more chance?"

A short silence on the line.

"If Miss Serena Tiffany is the head, and signs her own name," Natasha said, "the contracts go on. And the loans will be yours. If it is anyone else, nothing changes." "Thank you." Serena closed her eyes. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me. This is what our chairman wanted. One day he will explain it to you himself."

Serena's eyes opened. She looked at the jacket on her shoulders without meaning to.

"Will you come back in?" she asked.

"I'm turning the car round."

At the gate, two headlights swung in a slow circle and came back up the drive.

Every face on the steps turned to Serena. Not with pity. With fear.

Inside, the Baroness took Serena's hand at the podium and held it up, as if she had found it herself.

"The house is proud of its granddaughter," she said into the microphone, her voice almost steady again. "With the family's help, and the family's long years of work, Serena has-"

"I'll correct that," Natasha said.

The Baroness stopped.

"It was all Miss Tiffany's own work. Her bench. Her nose. Her nights." Natasha did not even look at her. "It has nothing to do with anyone else."

The Baroness swallowed it whole.

"Ms. Vale is right," she said. "The credit is Serena's. From tonight, Serena leads the

House of Tiffany's work with Halcyon."

Natasha held out a pen.

Serena signed her own name. Slowly, every letter, the way her mother had taught her to write labels.

The ballroom rose. The applause came like a wave breaking.

Serena looked up through it for one face. Alex stood at the back wall with a plate of bread rolls, smiling his mild, empty smile, and lifted one roll to her like a toast. Everything had happened exactly as he'd said.

She stood there in the noise, and the strangest thought came to her, quiet as rain on glass.

How did he know?

Then she did not sit down.

She turned to the front row, where Patricia sat with one red cheek, and the ballroom went quiet again.

"You made a bet with me, cousin," Serena said. "You lost. So kneel here."

Patricia laughed, high and thin. "Kneel? To you?"

Serena did not raise her voice.

"On your knees," she commanded. "Confess who actually created your perfume. Because if you don't, will abandon the House of Tiffany and watch this entire family turn to ash at my feet."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 812

Patricia laughed again, and this time it went all the way round the ballroom.

"Kneel? To you?" She stood up from the front row, one cheek still red from the rain. "I made that perfume. Everybody on this coast knows it. I'm not kneeling to anybody."

"You didn't make it," Serena said. "You stole it. From my mother's notebook. So kneel."

"I won't."

"Then don't."

Serena picked up the folders from the podium. All of them. She held them up so the whole room could see.

"These are the House of Tiffany's loans. Every one. They're mine now. Tomorrow I sell them. To anyone on this coast who wants to watch the Tiffanys go under. And I think there will be a long line."

The room went dead still.

Pauline was on her feet. "You wouldn't dare."

"Wouldn't I?" Serena looked down at the front row. At her aunt. At her cousin. At the Baroness beside the podium. "I know exactly what happened, Aunt Pauline. Patricia didn't do it alone. The whole house knew. My mother's notebooks went missing, and nobody looked for them. Patricia wore my mother's winter to every party for two years, and nobody asked where it came from. You all agreed. So she could stand up there tonight as the head of the house."

Her voice did not shake.

"That was the house's mistake. The whole house. So the whole house can pay for it."

"Serena." The Baroness's voice was very low. "Think about what you're saying."

"I have, Grandmother. For two years. In the dark."

The old woman looked at the folders in her granddaughter's hands. Three hundred years of the House of Tiffany, in a stack of paper. One girl could sell it in the morning, and nothing would be left by night.

She turned to the front row.

"Patricia. Come here."

Patricia didn't move. "Grandmother—"

"Come here!"

The Baroness's voice cracked across the ballroom like a whip. Patricia came out of the front row slowly, as if her shoes were full of sand, and stopped in front of the podium. In front of everyone.

"Kneel," the Baroness said.

"Grandmother, you can't! Everybody's watching!"

"That's why. Kneel."

"It's not fair! Everyone wanted me to have it! Mother said "

"Patricia!" Pauline hissed. "Shut up!"

"Do you want this house on the street tomorrow?" The Baroness took Patricia by the arm, hard, her old fingers digging into the silk. "Because of your pride? Because you couldn't make your own perfume? Kneel, girl. Now."

She pushed down.

Patricia's knees hit the polished floor in front of the podium with a small, hard sound. At every table, phones came up.

Patricia knelt there in her silk and pearls, with the whole coast watching, and looked up at Serena. Something in her face asked please. She had never said please in that house, and she couldn't find the word now.

"Say it," the Baroness ordered.

"I was wrong," Patricia said, to the floor.

"Louder," Serena said.

"I was wrong!"

"Who made it?"

Patricia's shoulders shook. She lifted her head, and her eyes were full of tears and murder at the same time.

"Aunt Rosalind made it." Loud enough for the doors. "The winter is hers. I took it out of her notebook, and I put my name on it."

The words fell into the silence and stayed there.

The fault was not in their stars. It was in themselves, every one of them at that front table, and now the whole coast had seen it.

At the Tiffany table, a quiet man in a grey suit had been looking at his own hands all night.

Gideon Tiffany lifted his eyes. He looked at his daughter at the podium, the way he used to look at her mother across a bench full of bottles.

He didn't look away.

Serena saw it. Just once. Her mouth trembled, and she pressed her lips together hard.

The Baroness turned to her. "Serena. Don't sell them. I'm asking you."

Serena set the folders down on the podium.

"Not tonight," she said quietly.

Patricia and wet up alone, her knees red, and walked back to the front row vel?

with her face turned from the phones, and sat beside her mother.

Pauline did not take her hand.

At the back wall, Alex took a bread roll from his plate and dropped it in the soup tureen.

Splash.

"Sorry," he told the waiter beside him. "It slipped."

Three tables laughed, grateful for something to laugh at.

Serena didn't laugh. She was looking at him. The mild, empty smile. The jacket in the rain. The bet. Grandmother begging, exactly as he'd said.

How did he know?

The great doors at the end of the ballroom opened.

They banged back against the wall, and a cold wind came in with the smell of rain and cigar smoke.

Julian Pryce stood in the doorway. An hour ago he had run out of this room with his family finished. Now his tie was gone, and he was smiling.

He was not alone.

Beside him stood a man with curly hair, dark glasses at night, and a fat cigar between his teeth. Behind him, on the

Bensin the rain, waited four men who did not look like guests.

The curly-haired man took the cigar out of his mouth and looked slowly round the ballroom, table by table, the way a man looks round a shop.

His eyes stopped on Serena.

Across the room, the ladle went very quietly back into the soup.

"Damn," the curly-haired man said. "What a lively room."

Julian stayed in the doorway behind him, leaned close, and pointed once down the long table.

At the folders under Natasha Vale's hand.

The man strolled the length of the ballroom, and the coast leaned away from him as he passed.

He stopped at Natasha's chair.

"Evening, lady. I'll take those papers off your hands."

Natasha didn't look up. She slid the folders down the tablecloth with one finger until they stopped in front of Serena.

The man's eyes went with the folders.

Then they went up to Serena, and stayed.

"Well," he said softly. "Tonight is my lucky night."

He leaned on the podium, close enough that Serena could smell the cigar on his breath.

"Hey, beautiful. You look familiar. Have we met?"

Serena looked at him once and said nothing.

"Must be fate, then. Come and have a drink with me. Bring your papers."

"I'm not interested."

"Money can buy your interest." He stroked his chin and smiled, slow and wet. "Let's not waste time. One night with me. Name your price. Any number you like. And the papers come with you."

"Get away from me."

"Oh, feisty." He laughed. "I like that."

He reached out to touch her face.

The slap cracked across the ballroom like a dropped plate. Five red fingers rose on his cheek in front of the whole coast.

He touched his face. "You hit me?"

"You heard me the first time," Serena said. "You just didn't understand it. Some people need it in writing."

"You little bitch!"

His hand came up.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 813

It never landed. Preston Tiffany shoved him back so hard he hit the next table and sent the glasses ringing.

"Hey! Hey! Who do you think you are? This is a Tiffany party!" "You want a fight? Pick on somebody your own size."

"Stay out of this, fat boy, or you'll be sorry."

"Ha! Sorry? Come on, then. Show me what you've got!"

The man swung. Preston ducked it, clumsy but lucky, and drove a fist into his nose. The man staggered back. Blood ran down over his lip and onto his white collar.

For one second, the ballroom was quiet.

Then the coast began to clap.

Preston turned round slowly with his fists up, and took it all in. It was the best thing that had ever happened to him.

"You picked the wrong Tiffany, mister."

The man wiped his nose with the back of his hand and looked at the blood on it.

"Do you know who I am?"

"I don't care who you are! Get out, while you can still walk!"

The man smiled with red teeth.

"You've got guts, fat boy. I'll give you that." He put his dark glasses back on. "Don't run away before I come back."

He walked out, and Julian with him.

Preston laughed, loud, for the room.

"What a clown. Did you see him? I could take ten like him before dessert."

"Preston!" Patricia was on her feet in the front row. She had lost her face an hour ago, and here was a way to win some back. "That is what a real man looks like."

She turned, slowly, so the whole room would follow her eyes, all the way to the back wall.

"Not someone who stands in a corner and watches while his wife is grabbed. Did you even put down your plate, Alex?"

Laughter, again, the easy kind.

Serena did not laugh. When that hand came up at her face, her husband had not moved one tep. She was angry with herself for minding.

Alex looked down at the plate in his hands, surprised to find it there.

"I was holding the rolls," he explained.

"You were holding the rolls," Patricia repeated.

"Somebody has to." He held the plate out toward her, politely. "Would you like one? You've had a hard night. You were on the floor for a long time."

Half the room choked into their napkins. Patricia went scarlet and sat down hard.

Preston slapped the table. "Leave the idiot alone, cousin. You need a man for a job like that. If that clown comes back, I'll—"

The great doors banged open.

"Seal the doors!"

The curly-haired man was back, and big men in wet coats came in behind him, ten, twelve, more. Two put their backs to the doors.

Julian Pryce walked in last, with his hands in his pockets, smiling.

Preston stepped forward like a hero. "What? Back for another one?"

Then he saw how many there were, and his voice ran out.

"Surround them."

The men made a ring round the podium. Preston's mouth went dry. Weren't fights supposed to be one against one?

"You'd better watch it. Do you know who I am? My grandmother is the Baroness Imelda Tiffany!"

"So what?" The curly-haired man took off his dark glasses and folded them away. "My name is Connor Russell. My father is Victor Russell."

The name went through the ballroom like cold water. Victor Russell owned the harbour, and everything that came in or out of it after dark. The men who crossed him were never found.

Preston's red face went the color of milk.

"You... you're Victor Russell's son?"

"Not so brave now, fat boy?" Connor walked up to him, slowly. "Where's your fight gone?"

"It's... it's a misunderstanding, Mr. Russell." Preston tried to smile. "A joke. Just a joke between friends."

"A misunderstanding?"

Connor slapped him across the face. Then again, backhand, harder. The sound rang off the high gold ceiling.

Preston swallowed it. He kept smiling, because smiling was all he had left.

"My grandmother knows your father. Business. Couldn't we let this go, just this once? I'll make it up to you."

"Who do you think you are?" Connor put one finger on Preston's forehead and pushed. One step back. Again. Another step. Until his back hit the podium. Nobody clapped now.

At the back wall, Alex set his plate of rolls down on the side table, very carefully, so it wouldn't make a sound.

"Julian," he called out. "Which ones?"

Standing in the middle of the ring, Julian flashed a smile and pointed directly at the folders sitting in front of Serena. "Those are the loan agreements against my family."

Two hulking men cleared the folders off the podium in one clean sweep, delivering them to Connor like an offering. Every single debt the House of Tiffany had ever taken on was in those pages.

"That's the papers," Connor said. He looked at Serena, then at Patricia, and smiled with bloody teeth. "Now. Which one of you is coming home with me tonight?"

Patricia jumped up. "Are you mad? This is the Grand. This is Halcyon's banquet. Half the coast is watching you!"

"Let them watch." Connor spread his hands. "Your fat cousin hit me first. In front of all of them. Everything after this is self-defence."

"That's a lie!"

"Then call the police, sweetheart. Tell them it was a Russell. See who comes."

He nodded at Patricia, and two of his men started toward her.

"Stop." Serena came down off the podium. Her voice was cold and steady. "Leave her alone. She has nothing to do with this. The papers were mine. If you want someone, you have me."

Connor turned, slowly, and smiled wider.

"You'll take her place?" He caught Serena's wrist before she could pull away. "Fine. I let your cousin go. And you come with me. Tonight. Make me happy, and maybe forget about my nose

"You disgust me."

Her free hand came up to slap him again. He caught that wrist too, and laughed into her face.

"Twice? No, beautiful. Not twice." He looked over his shoulder. "Boys. Tie her up."

Two men took Serena by the arms. She fought them. It was like fighting two doors. "Let my daughter go!" Gideon ran at them, and Connor put his shoe in his stomach and pushed. He sat down hard on the polished floor.

"Father!" Serena called and she looked up at the one man still standing near her. "Preston! Do something! Please!"

Preston swallowed. His cheek was still burning. He took one small step forward.

"Mr. Russell. Come on. Let's talk about this like gentlemen. Why bring the girls into it?"

"Talk?" Connor turned. "I'm not finished with you yet, fat boy, and you want to save somebody else?"

"No. No, that's not what I meant. We can settle this nicely. My grandmother can pay

Connor hit him. Not a slap this time. Preston went down beside the podium and stayed there, holding his face.

"Say one more word," Connor said pleasantly, "and they'll carry you out of here in a tablecloth."

Preston didn't say one more word. He kept his head down, and he looked at the floor, and he did not look up when Serena said his name.

Cowards die many times before their deaths. Preston was dying one of them now, on the floor by the podium, with the whole coast watching.

"Ha." Connor shook his head. "So you're just a coward. A big one. I don't know why the girls bother with. you. He tucked the folder tighter under his arm. "Bring her. I'm going to have a lovely night."

"He

"Serena!" Gideon screamed from the floor. "Somebody help my daughter! Anybody!"

Nobody moved. Five hundred people in silk and black ties, and not one of them stood up. Preston's head stayed down. Across the room, an old man shook his head and looked at his plate.

The men began to drag Serena toward the doors. Her heels slid on the polished floor. She twisted round once, looking for one face at the back wall.

The plate of bread rolls was still there on the side table, neat and untouched.

The idiot was gone.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 814

The bread rolls sat on the side table, neat and untouched.

Now the men had Serena by both arms, and the great doors were getting closer.

Then somebody stepped into their path, holding a silver tray with nothing on it.

"Excuse me," Alex said. "That's my wife."

The men stopped, mostly from surprise. Connor turned round with the loan folders under his arm.

"What is this?" he said. "Another hero?"

"No. A husband."

Connor laughed. His men laughed with him, and then five hundred guests laughed from their chairs, because laughing was safer.

Connor walked up close and blew cigar smoke into the idiot's face.

"You've got some nerve, talking to me like that. Do you know who I am? My father is Victor Russell."

Alex blinked through the smoke. "My father is the Emperor."

He said it the way he said everything, mildly, like a man telling you the time.

The laughing stopped.

For a moment the whole ballroom remembered at once what nobody ever said aloud. The idiot by the kennels was the Tenth Prince. His father really was the Emperor.

Then Connor smiled.

"Your father," he said, loud enough for every table, "threw you out. He married you off to a perfume house and forgot your name. As for me, I'm my father's sole heir. Do you understand the difference, idiot?"

"I think so." Alex nodded. "You should let her go. Before it gets out of hand."

"And if I don't?"

"Then you'll be sorry." Alex thought about it. "I don't know you, really. I don't care very much, either. Three seconds, please. Or two."

Heads turned from the idiot standing in the middle of the floor to Preston, the cousin who had folded, still on the floor by the podium.

"You stupid idiot," Preston hissed. "You're going to get us all killed!"

"Are you insane?" Connor looked Alex up and down. "You want to play the hero? Fine. Let's see what you've got."

He snapped his fingers. Two men stepped out of the ring, the biggest in the room, one of them smiling with a gold tooth.

Alex looked once at the long table, at Natasha and the phone in her hand. Nobody else saw it.

A minute earlier, at the back wall, Alex had taken out his cheap phone and typed eight words to Natasha Vale. When I look at you, cut the lights.

Natasha touched her screen.

Every light in the Grand went out.

A woman screamed. A chair went over.

"What the hell?" Connor shouted.

A grunt. A thud. The gold-tooth man made one sound and stopped. Then a second thud.

"What did he just do?" Connor's voice cracked. "Bruno? Carl!"

Nobody answered him.

"Last chance," said a quiet voice in the dark. "Let her go."

"In your dreams! All of you, get him!"

Thud. Thud. Thud. Like rain starting on a roof.

The hands on Serena's arms were gone. Something moved past her in the black.

It smelled of cedar. And the sea.

Then the thuds stopped. Only Connor was left, breathing.

"Who are you?" His voice had gone thin. "Who the hell are you?"

The voice was very close. Nobody in that hall had ever heard it.

"Your reckoning."

The lights came on.

Every man of the ring lay on the floor in the spilled soup. Only the two men on the doors still stood, white as tablecloths. They had never come in.

"What happened?" Patricia was on her feet in the front row. "Who did that? Who was that?"

"Something did it in the dark," Preston whispered.

"There's nobody there! Preston, there's nobody there!"

Serena stood alone, rubbing her wrists. By the doors her father stared at her as if she might disappear.

Then she saw her husband.

He was under the nearest table, on his knees, holding the silver tray over his head like an umbrella.

He peeked out from under it at the bodies on the floor.

"Oh," he said, pleased. "I think I have a guardian angel."

The nearest table burst out laughing.

"A guardian angel!" Patricia shrieked. "He thinks the angels did it!"

"He was under the table the whole time," Preston said. "Hiding, the coward. Look at him."

Serena didn't laugh. The prince of darkness is a gentleman. She looked dan with the tray over his at head and thought Did I never look

"Come out!" Connor screamed at the room. "Whoever you are, come out!"

Nobody came out.

He backed into Serena and had her by the hair. A short knife touched her throat.

The ballroom screamed.

"Stay back! Nobody move!" Connor's spit hit her cheek. "Come out now, or I open her up in front of all of them!"

Serena looked only at the table. Her husband was looking straight back.

"Don't be afraid, wife," Alex said quietly. "Close your eyes."

"Close her eyes?" Connor laughed, high and wild. "Why, idiot? So she doesn't see you cry?"

Alex's eyes moved once, to the long table.

The lights went out.

Serena closed her eyes.

She felt the knife leave her throat before she heard anything. Then a crack, like a branch snapping, and Connor's scream.

"The thing I hate most," said the voice that was nobody's, "is being threatened."

A second crack. A third. One slap, so loud it echoed off the gold ceiling.

"Shut up."

Something heavy fell and did not get up.

The lights came on.

The knife lay at Serena's feet. The loan folders sat on her table in a neat square stack.

Connor Russell lay on his back in the

Soup wit his eyes rolled up, his wrist broken, his other arm bent the

We way across his cheste

And under the table, the idiot still knelt with his tray.

"Is my angel gone?" he asked.

"Is he dead?" Patricia whispered. "Did the angel kill him?"

"Shut up, Patricia," said Preston.

The two men on the doors came in at last, picked Connor up between them, and carried him out into the rain.

The doors banged shut behind them.

For a second nobody in the Grand said anything.

Serena was the first to move. She pulled her husband out from under the table by his sleeve.

"Do you know what you've done?" she whispered. "You have to go, Alex. Tonight. Leave the coast before his father hears your name."

"I don't think I need to," Alex said.

"Stop it. Stop being brave." Her voice shook. "Victor Russell isn't the house. He kill people."

"He won't listen to reason, cousin," Patricia said from the front row. "He never has. Don't waste your breath on him."

"I don't care what you think," Serena told her husband. "You have to leave tonight."

"And I don't care what you say," said Alex mildly. "I'm not leaving." Then Preston ran to the doors and spread his arms across them.

"He can't leave!" He pointed at Alex, and his finger shook. "He made him angry the walks out of here, victor Russell comes for us, and we'll be the ones who pay for it! He stays, and we hand him over!"

"Preston's right," Patricia said. "If he runs, we suffer for it."

Serena stepped in front of her husband.

"He came for me when nobody else did," she said. "He's the only one who stood in front of me."

"Nobody asked him to!" Patricia snapped. "He brought it on himself. Let him face it!"

"That's right!" Preston said. "He faces Victor alone!"

Serena turned to her husband. "Alex, this is life and death. Victor Russell is not a joke."

"You don't need to worry about me, wife," he said. "Just sit and watch."

"What do you think you are going to do?"

Alex looked at the doors, and at the rain beyond them, and nodded politely.

"All right," he said. "I'll go and say sorry to his daddy myself. He will forgive me and forget all of this."

The whole room laughed.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 815

The idiot had walked out of the Grand a minute after his promise, with two bread rolls wrapped in a napkin for the dog. By midnight the guests were gone, and he had not come back.

Serena sat on the Grand's wet steps with her phone. Her father sat beside her in his torn jacket, holding his ribs.

"I need to find a way to settle this," she said. "Peacefully. Tonight."

"Serena." Gideon's voice was careful. "It's Victor Russell. Nobody on this coast will put their hand into that fire. Not for us."

"Then I'll ask until somebody does. He thinks Victor Russell will forgive him, Father. He thinks he can walk in and say sorry."

"It would be the worst thing you could do. If you cross him now—"

"He came for me, Father." She looked at him. "When nobody in that room moved, he came for me with a tray. Should I just sit here and watch him die?"

Gideon opened his mouth. Then he closed it again.

She dialled.

"Good evening. It's Serena Tiffany. I'm so sorry to call this late. It's about Victor Russell "

The line went dead.

The next one.

"It's Serena Tiffany. I only need a word to someone at the harbour-"

Dead.

"Please, I'm only asking you to speak to him. You've known my grandmother thirty years-
"

"Is this about the Russell boy?"

"Yes, but if you would just-"

Click.

The fourth man didn't let her finish her name. "Don't call this number again, Miss Tiffany."

The fifth didn't pick up at all.

She tried the sixth. It didn't ring. A flat recorded voice said the number could not be reached.

The seventh. The same voice. The eighth. The same.

She went back to the first number, the one that had hung up on her. The same flat voice.

"They've blocked you," Gideon said softly. "Word moves faster than you can dial. Nobody wants Victor Russell to find their name on your phone."

"Nine," Serena said, and dialled. "Ten."

The voice. The voice.

"Eleven."

"Serena. It isn't that they won't help. It's that they can't."

The rain came down past the steps in silver strings. She held the phone in her lap and stared at it.

Then it buzzed with a message.

Leave it to me. Gran knows the man. I'll make a few calls. Don't worry. P.

Serena read it twice. An hour ago Preston had sat on the floor and said nothing while she was dragged across the room.

"Preston says he'll try," she said.

"Preston," said her father, "says a great many things."

At the kerb below the steps, a long black car sat with its engine running.

In the back seat, Rebecca Morgan had the Grand's security footage open on her phone. She had paid the night manager for it before the soup was cold.

She watched it again. The idiot with the tray. Then black. Ninety seconds of black, full of screams and the sound of men falling. Then the lights, and a hall full of bodies, and a man in the soup.

"Black, black, black," she murmured, "and then a man in the soup."

In the driving seat, Peters met her eyes in the mirror.

"You think I should help the Tiffanys," she said. "Don't you."

Peters said nothing.

"Not yet. I want to see who turns the lights back on." She closed the phone. "Put a man on the Tiffany gate tonight. I want to know where every one of them goes."

At the same hour, on the far side of the city, the harbour hospital smelled of bleach and wet wool.

The emergency doors banged open. A tall, bearded man came through them with his men behind him, and the night nurse stepped quickly out of his way. Victor Russell had owned the harbour for twenty year Nobody in that building needed to hear his name.

"Doctor! How is my son?"

A thin doctor in glasses came out holding a clipboard against his chest like a shield.

"Mr. Russell. Your son is stable. The wrist is broken, cleanly. We've set it."

"And his other arm?"

"That's the difficulty, sir. The nerve isn't cut. Nothing is torn. I can find nothing wrong with it at all, except that it doesn't work. I'm afraid he may never lift it again."

Through the glass, Connor sat on the bed staring at his right arm, lying in his lap like something that belonged to somebody else.

Victor grabbed the doctor by the collar and lifted him onto his toes.

"Never? I'll give you a hundred million. Fix it."

"It isn't money, sir," the doctor gasped. "There's nothing there to fix."

Victor threw him aside and turned to the men who had carried his son out of the Grand.

"Talk. What the hell happened?"

They told him. The idiot with the tray. The Emperor. The dark. The idiot under the table.

"One waiter with a tray told my son his father was the Emperor, then the lights went out, and all of you fell over in the dark?"

He slapped the first man across the face. Then the second. Then every man in the line, while the nurses pretended not to see.

"Useless! Twenty men, and you couldn't beat one waiter!"

Nobody told him the waiter had spent the fight under a table. Nobody wanted to be slapped twice.

When Victor spoke again, his voice was low, and that was worse. Revenge should have no bounds.

"Gather every man we have at the harbour. Bring me that idiot with the tray, and his wife." He stared through the glass at his son's limp arm. " want her to watch white I carve him apart."

"Boss, he says he's a prince. The Emperor's own blood."

"My son's blood matters more than any emperor's. If I feared the throne, I wouldn't be in this line of work."

Within the hour, the harbour woke. Engines started along the docks. Phones rang in the rooms above the fish market.

Serena didn't sleep.

She sat by the window at home with every light off but one, watching the gate, the phone that nobody would answer still in her hand.

A little before dawn, somebody came up the drive on foot. Slow. Shoulders down. Shoes black with rain.

She ran down and pulled the door open.

"Alexander! Where did you go? What is happening?"

Alex stood dripping on the step with the empty napkin in his hand. He looked tired all the way down to his bones. Then he gave her a big smile.

"I forgot," he said. "I don't know where his daddy's house is. So I walked around and around until I got tired, and then I came home."

"You walked all night?"

"The dog liked the bread."

Serena let out a breath she felt she had been holding since the Grand.

"It's okay," she said. "As long as you're safe. We'll think again tomorrow."

He nodded, went up the stairs, and was asleep before she had locked the door.

In the morning the kitchen television was on, and nobody was eating.

"Overnight at the harbour," the reporter said, "police found the bodies of Victor Russell men along the ageks. All of them. Officers say there are no bullet wounds, and no sign of who or what was there."

The picture cut to a dock worker with his hood up, his voice shaking.

"I saw a shadow. Just a shadow, moving between the cranes. And everywhere it went, men fell down. No sound. They just fell."

Gideon's cup stopped halfway to his mouth.

Alex came down the stairs in his slippers, hair everywhere, and looked at the screen for a long moment.

"Oh no," he said sadly. "Now who do I say sorry to?"

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 816

By nine o'clock the whole coast was watching the harbour on its phones, and the Baroness had called the house to breakfast.

Nobody was eating there either.

The Baroness sat at the head with her cane against her chair, Patricia at her right hand in pale silk. Serena sat beside her husband, who was buttering his third piece of toast.

The television on the sideboard showed the docks again. Police tape. Wet cranes. White sheets.

"All of them," the Baroness said flatly. "Victor Russell and every man he had. In one night."

"I heard there were nearly two hundred," Patricia said softly.

The door opened, and Preston came in.

He had changed his shirt and combed his hair, and he did not look at Serena.

"Morning, Gran." He kissed the Baroness's cheek. "I suppose you've seen the news."

"Sit down, Preston."

He sat and buttered a roll slowly, and the whole table waited.

"I told you I'd make a few calls," he said at last. "I made them."

Serena's hand went still on the cloth.

"What calls?" the Baroness asked.

"Friends of mine. From the capital." Preston shrugged, very modestly. "People Victor Russell should have been afraid of. I told them what he'd done to our family at the Grand. I told them he'd threatened my cousin. And I told them a Tiffany doesn't forget."

Patricia put a hand on her heart. "Preston. You didn't."

"I did. I don't like to talk about it."

"You're talking about it now," said Alex, with his mouth full.

Nobody laughed. The Baroness looked down the table at Preston for a long moment, the way she looked at a good account.

"Well," she said. "It seems somebody in this house can still be useful."

Preston smiled into his roll.

Serena breathed in. "Who did you call, Preston?"

"I can't say names, cousin. These are serious people."

"But the man on the television," Alex said helpfully, "said it was a shadow."

Patricia laughed first. Then Preston. Then half the table.

"A shadow." Preston wiped his eyes. "Gran, he believes the television."

"The man with the hood," said the Baroness, "was drunk. Alex. Be quiet, and thank your cousin."

Alex looked up from his toast. "Thank him?"

"He saved your wife's life last night. He saved yours too, though I can't think why he bothered. Stand up and thank him."

Alex put the toast down, stood, and bowed to Preston across the table, low and polite, the way a waiter bows.

"Thank you, Preston, for calling your friends." He straightened up and smiled. "What's their number? I want to thank them too. I could bring them bread."

Preston coughed, reached for his water, and missed the glass.

"It's a private line," he said. "They don't like idiots ringing them."

The Baroness wasn't listening any more. She was looking at the television, where the reporter stood in the rain before the white sheets, and her eyes had gone very still, the way they went still over a column of figures that might add up to money.

"Patricia," she said. "Who do we know at the Coast Gazette?"

Patricia understood at once. "The editor's wife buys our perfume, Grandmother."

"Call her. And the television people." The Baroness tapped her cane once on the floor: "For years that harbour has been a sickness on this coast. Every family in Westmere paid Victor Russell, and every family was afraid of him. Last night a Tiffany cleaned it out."

"Gran," Preston said, and for a moment he looked frightened. "I don't think I should

"You don't think. I do." The Baroness looked at him. "This house was laughed at in the Grand last night. This morning it will have a hero. It's decided."

"Does Preston get a medal?" Alex asked.

"Eat your toast," said the Baroness.

By noon, Patricia had made her calls.

By evening, Preston Tiffany's face was on every screen on the coast.

He stood on the steps of the house in a dark suit, with the Baroness beside him and

Patricia just behind, while the cameras flashed.

"The harbour has been sick for vel years," the reporter said over the pictures. "Drugs, debts, beatings, men who answered to no one. Today the Tiffany family has confirmed that it was Preston Tiffany, the Baroness's grandson, who moved against Victor Russell after Russell's men attacked his family at the Grand Sources close to the family call him the man who cleaned the garbage off the harbour."

On the steps, a reporter pushed a microphone up at him. "Mr. Tiffany! Were you afraid?"

Preston swallowed. Then he looked at the cameras, and the cameras looked back at him, and something in his face began to enjoy it.

"A Tiffany doesn't forget," he said.

In the kitchen, Felicia turned the television down and looked at the boy at the table, who was feeding a bread crust to the dog under it.

"Prince," she whispered. "Do you know something?"

"I know the dog likes bread," Alex said.

Serena stood in the doorway behind them with her arms folded, watching her cousin on the screen.

"Eleven calls," she said quietly. "I made eleven calls last night, and every one of them hung up on me. And Preston made his from his bed."

"It's nice for Preston," Alex said. "He's never been a hero before."

She looked at him for a long moment. His wet jacket still hung on the hook by the side door, and as she passed it, she breathed in without meaning to.

Rain. Salt. And under it, faint and clean, something like cedar.

She did not ask.

On the far side of the city, in the harbour hospital, the same news was playing on a small screen high on the wall.

Connor Russell lay on the bed with his dead arm across the sheet, and watched Preston Tiffany smile on the steps.

He had seen that face last night. On the floor of the Grand, with its head down.

"Him?" Connor said. His voice cracked. "That coward killed my father?"

Nobody in the room answered. By the door, a quiet young man in a grey jacket stood holding a cup of coffee nobody would drink now Simon had carried Victor Russell's coffee for six years. He had not been years. at the harbour last night. He was the only one of them left.

Connor reached for his phone with his good hand.

"Get me Howard Black," he said. "My father paid that man for years. Now he can earn it."

He stared up at the screen, at the smiling face on the steps.

"Preston Tiffany," he said. "I want him dead. And everyone in that house who stood beside him."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 817

The garage wing smelled of oil, wet dog and fresh bread.

Felicia came in with the morning paper under her arm and her face pink from running. The dog lifted its head from Alex's slipper and thumped its tail once.

"Prince. Look."

She spread the Coast Gazette across the workbench. Preston filled the whole front page, standing on the steps in his dark suit, his chin up. Above him, in letters as tall as a thumb: HARBOUR HERO.

"It's a very good picture," Alex said.

"That's not all." Felicia lowered her voice. "The Baroness is giving a dinner for him. Tonight, in the great hall. The mayor's coming. Half the coast. And you're to carry the trays."

"Will there be bread?"

"Prince." She looked at him, and her eyes were wet. "Somebody killed every man on the docks the night you went walking. And this morning you're asking about bread."

Alex broke a roll in half and gave the bigger piece to the dog.

"I walked a long way," he said. "I'm very hungry."

Felicia opened her mouth. Then she folded the paper slowly and did not ask what she had decided not to ask.

On the hill above Calder, behind high white walls, Howard Black was cutting roses with a pair of silver scissors. His adviser, Douglas Coleman, an old man in a grey suit, stood beside him.

"Connor Russell called again," Douglas said. "The third time."

"Poor boy." Howard snipped a stem and turned the rose in his fingers. "His father dead, his arm dead, and a Tiffany grinning on every screen."

"He wants Preston Tiffany dead. And the house with him."

"Victor was a brother of the order."

The warmth bled from Howard's handsome features. "Who dared touch one of our own?" He set the rose into the basket with quiet deliberation. "Can you truly believe it? That boy, prone upon the floor of the Grand, slaughtering Victor Russell and every man at his back under cover of darkness?"

"No, sir. Victor called me the night before he died. He wanted a man at the Grand dealt with. He didn't say who. Then the lights went out." Douglas tapped the basket. "Somebody stands behind that boy. Whoever moves on the Tiffanys first may be next."

"Then I don't move."

"You don't need to. Victor had a sworn brother. Curtis Bennett, the Brotherhood's enforcer. When one of them falls, the Brotherhood rides for its own." Douglas smiled thinly. "Tell Curtis. Let him do the rest. Then we sit back and watch the show."

Howard cut another rose, and his eyes lit up.

"Call him," he said. "Now."

That evening, the great hall of the Tiffany house blazed with light.

In a small room off the hall, Preston stood in front of a long mirror while Patricia fixed his tie.

"Stop shaking," she said.

"I'm not shaking."

"Your tie is shaking, Preston. Ties don't shake on their own." She pulled the knot tight. "Somebody asks you how you did it, you smile. You say a Tiffany doesn't forget. That's all you ever say."

"Pat." He caught her wrist. "That night. After the Grand. I didn't make any calls."

"I know."

"I drove to a bar on the docks road and drank till they threw me out. I was so scared

I was sick in Gran's roses. And then I wake up, and the whole harbour's dead, and I'm a hero."

Patricia looked at him in the mirror for a long moment. Then she smoothed his lapels with both hands, sweet as sugar.

"Then you're a lucky hero," she said. "Smile."

At that same hour, black cars came up the harbour hill and stopped in rows outside Victor Russell's house.

ouse

Men in long dark coats stood indine's on the wet gravel, each with the same black ring and its white skull.

In the hall, between two white flags, Victor lay in his coffin. A man with cropped grey hair stood over him.

"Uncle Curtis." Connor came down the stairs between two men, his right arm dead in a sling. "You came."

"He was my brother. Not by blood. By oath. That's stronger." Curtis Bennett did not look away from the coffin. "Who did this?"

"Preston Tiffany. The whole coast says it. Tonight his family is giving a dinner for him."

"A dinner." Curtis laid his palm flat on the coffin lid. "I don't care whose hand held the knife. He killed a brother. I'll take the whole house that stood beside him."

Blood will have blood.

Upstairs in the Tiffany house, the great hall was full. Every family that had paid Victor Russell for twenty years queued to shake Preston's hand.

"A Tiffany doesn't forget," Preston told each of them, and each of them laughed too loudly.

"Preston, dear." An aunt caught his sleeve. "My boy needs a position. Now the harbour listens to you, surely there's a desk for him?"

"Of course," Preston said grandly. "Anything. Just send him to me."

"Where's the idiot?" someone asked.

"Carrying trays," said Patricia. "Gran says he can stay in the hall as long as he doesn't speak to the mayor's wife about bread again."

The guests laughed. Across the room, Alex walked among them with a tray of little rolls, offering them one at a time very carefully, with both hands. Most of them did not see him at all.

Serena saw him. She did not laugh.

The Baroness lifted one hand, and the hall went quiet.

"My grandson," she said. "Preston. Say something."

Preston lifted his glass. It shook only a little.

"To the harbour," he said. "Clean at last."

The whole coast raised its glasses to him.

And the doors of the great hall burst open.

Cold night air rushed in over the candles. Men in long dark coats came through the doorway, ten, twenty more and of round the walls without a word. Every one of them wore a black ring with a small white skull.

A glass slipped from a guest's fingers and broke on the marble.

The last man in walked to the middle of the hall and looked along the rows of frightened faces.

"Nobody leaves," he snapped. "Which one of you is Preston Tiffany?"

Alex broke into a broad grin, pointing Preston out for the whole room to see. "That's him right there—the big hero! Go on, you ought to shake his hand."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 818

For one heartbeat nobody in the great hall moved.

Then the doorway kept filling. Ten men. Twenty. Forty. Fifty of them in long dark coats, pouring in from the front doors and the kitchen passage and the terrace, until every wall of the hall was lined with them and there was no way out that did not have a man standing in it.

Every one of them had a gun in his hand.

"Down! Everybody down!"

"Hands on the table! Where I can see them!"

"Phones! On the floor! Now!"

A gun barrel cracked against a crystal glass and it burst across the cloth. A guest who reached for his pocket was slammed face first onto the table with a muzzle pressed into the back of his neck. The mayor had almost reached the side door. A man stepped out in front of him, put a pistol under his chin, and walked him backwards, step by step, to his chair.

"Sit, Mr. Mayor."

The mayor sat. His wife was crying without a sound.

A waiter dropped his tray. Two guns swung on him at once. "Down!" He knelt in the broken glass with his hands over his head.

Fifty guns. Fifty skull rings. Half the coast, who a minute ago had been laughing.

Only one man in the whole room was still smiling, and he was holding a tray of bread rolls.

Preston stood at the head of the table with his glass still raised and the idiot's finger still pointing at him.

The man who had asked the question walked down the length of the table and stopped in front of him. He was Curtis Bennett's right-hand man, and in the Brotherhood that meant his word was Curtis's word.

"Mr. Tiffany. Mr. Bennett would like a word."

Wine slopped over the rim of Preston's glass onto his white cuff.

"There's been a mistake," he said. "I don't know any Mr. Bennett."

"He knows you."

The Baroness rose with both hands on her cane, and three guns turned to her. She did not sit down.

"Sir, what is the meaning of this? My grandson is the hero of this coast. The Gazette says so."

"Your grandson killed Victor Russell," said the right-hand man. "The whole harbour says so."

"Then the whole harbour is wrong," said the Baroness. "We can all swear to it." "That's right!" cried an aunt. "Preston was here! He was home with us!"

"We'll testify! Every one of us!"

A gun swung toward the aunts, and the testifying stopped.

"We'll find out who's wrong," the right-hand man said, "after Mr. Bennett has asked his question."

"You wouldn't dare touch him." Gideon was on his feet, pale to the lips. "You won't live to see the morning if you touch my family."

The man behind Gideon put a hand on his shoulder and pressed him back down into his chair, the way you press down a cork.

"Tonight Mr. Bennett's word is the only law in this house. Anyone who gets in the way of it comes with the rest." The right-hand man raised his voice to the whole hall. "Everyone named Tiffany comes with us. The rest of you go home, and forget what you saw. If one of you calls the police, we'll know your name by morning."

The men at the doors stepped aside. The guests ran, and nobody stopped them. In a few breaths there was nobody left but the family, the candles and fifty men in long coats.

Then the ring closed in. Two men to every Tiffany. They took the Baroness by both arms, cane and all. They lifted Preston out of his chair because his legs would not hold him. They took Gideon, and Marissa, and the aunts, and Patricia, who did not make a sound.

Serena stood up by herself. "Everyone, stay calm," she said. "Do what they say. It's a mistake. When they've asked their question, they'll let us go."

A man with a skull ring stepped past the idiot without looking at him, the way everyone always stepped past the idiot.

"Excuse me," Alex said politely. "I'm a Tiffany too. By marriage."

The man stopped.

"Nobody asked you," Patricia hissed.

"He said everyone named Tiffany," said Alex. "That's me. I have a paper."

The right-hand man studied the mild, pleased face for a long moment. "Then you come too."

"Can I bring the rolls?"

"Leave the rolls."

The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool.

A line of black cars waited on the drive with their engines running. In the back of the third car Serena sat pressed against her husband's side, and under the coat on her lap her hand found his and held it hard.

"Stay behind me," she whispered. "Whatever happens. Stay behind me."

"All right," said Alex. "Is there dessert where we're going?"

She almost laughed. It came out as a breath.

Twenty minutes later the cars stopped outside a dark house with white flags on either side of the door.

"This is not a police station," the Baroness said as they pulled her out. "This is no place for questions. This is a funeral."

"Stop talking," said the right-hand man. "Go in."

More men waited inside, two deep along the walls and up the stairs, and the candlelight caught their black rings Between them on trestles stood a coffin Above hung a large photograph of Victor Russell, smiling his gold-toothed smile at them all. Marissa grabbed Gideon's arm.

A man came out of the next room and walked slowly along their line, looking at each face the way a man looks at horses at a market.

"Is everyone here?"

"Every one of the name, boss," said his right-hand man. "And the son-in-law."

"Good. My name is Curtis Bennett. Some of you may have heard of the Brotherhood."

Patricia had. Her face went grey.

"I don't like to waste time," Curtis said politely. So I'll ask one question Answer it honestly, and you may all walk out of here je to me, and you'll go into the ground beside my brother." He laid his hand on the coffin. "Did his death have anything to do with you?"

"Mr. Bennett, we will cooperate fully," the Baroness said at once. "Fully."

"No! Nothing to do with us!"

"We were at home! All of us!"

"We don't even know the man!"

They all spoke at once. Curtis let them run out of words.

"Connor. Take a look at them."

"I'm coming."

Connor limped out of the shadows by the stairs, held up by two of his men, the dead arm strapped against his chest. He looked along the line with eyes that had not slept for two nights.

He lifted his good hand and pointed.

"Him," he said. "Preston."

Preston made a sound like a kicked dog.

Then Connor's finger moved slowly down the line, past the Baroness, past Patricia, past the idiot, and stopped.

"And her," he said. He was pointing at Serena. "She was on every phone on this coast the night my father died. Asking about him. Asking where he was."

Every face in the line turned to look at Serena.

Serena did not look away from him. Beside her, the idiot looked at the coffin with polite interest, as if it were a piece of furniture he was thinking of buying.

"Her first," Connor said. "No. Him first." He turned back to Preston. "Tell me honestly. Did you have anything to do with my father's death?"

"No! Nothing! I don't know anything!" Sweat ran down Preston's face into his collar.

"You don't know? Or you don't want to say?"

"It's a misunderstanding, Mr. Russell! All of it, from start to finish!"

"Then you'll need some help remembering." Connor jerked his chin, and two men stepped toward Preston.

"Wait!" cried the aunt at the end of the line. "Do you know who he is? He has friends in the capital! Serious people. He called them the night of the Grand, and they cleaned the whole harbour for us!"

The hall went very quiet.

"There, Uncle Curtis." Connor smiled for the first time. "You heard her. He called people in."

Curtis turned his head slowly toward Preston.

"So," he said. "You're the man with friends who kill."

"No! No, I—"

"Preston, why are you shaking?" the aunt said proudly. "Tell him! Tell him about your friends!"

"Shut up!" Preston slapped her hand off his arm so hard she stumbled. "Shut up, shut up, shut up!"

The aunt stared at him, holding her wrist.

Curtis Bennett waited, very patiently, with his hand on his brother's coffin.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 819

The aunt held her wrist against her chest and stared at Preston as if she had never seen him before.

"Preston, why did you hit me?" Her voice shook. "You told us yourself, at breakfast. You picked up the phone, and by morning the harbour was clean. Did I say something wrong?"

"Shut up!" Preston's voice cracked down the middle. "Will you just shut up!"

"A witness," said Curtis Bennett.

He took his hand off the coffin for the first time since they had come in. He walked down the line slowly, and stopped so close to Preston that Preston had nowhere to look but at him.

"Your own family," Curtis said gently. "Under my brother's roof. I'd call that a witness. Wouldn't you?"

Preston's knees went. He grabbed at the arm of the man beside him, and the man shook him off.

"No! Listen to me! Please, listen!" It all came out of him at once. "I never called anyone! I don't have friends in the capital! I don't have friends anywhere! I was at home that night, drunk in my own bed! I woke up and the harbour was finished, and everybody was looking at me!"

The hall went very still. Only the candle flames moved, low along the black lid of the coffin.

"Gran called the Gazette," Preston gasped. "Not me! They put me on the television! What was I supposed to say? No, thank you?" He spread his shaking hands at the guns along the walls. "Look at me! If I had friends like that, would I be standing here?"

Nobody in the line breathed.

Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practise to deceive.

The Baroness's cane, which had not moved all night, slid an inch on the stone.

"You stood on the steps," she said, in the flat voice she kept for a bad account. "In a dark suit. And you told the whole coast that a Tiffany doesn't forget."

"You told the coast!" Preston laughed, high and horrible. "I only smiled! You all wanted a hero so badly. I just stood where you put me." He swung round. "Ask Patricia! She knew! She knew before the banquet!"

Every face turned to Patricia.

Patricia smoothed the silk over her hip. "Don't look at me, I don't know anything," she said sweetly. "I only told him to smile."

"You looked me dead in the eye and gave your word," the aunt hissed, stepping into his personal space until he had nowhere to turn. "You swore that if we bankrolled you and your partner, the harbor docks would belong to our family. Five hundred thousand dollars, Preston. Half a million wired directly to your name!"

Preston's spine hit the wall. Cornered, his cowardice turned into feral panic.

"That's on you, you old hag!" he shrieked, clawing at the wall behind him. "You practically threw the cash at me, so why wouldn't I take it? I dumped it into online poker tables, alright? It's wiped out! Every single cent is gone!"

She flew at his face. Before anyone could catch her, her nails raked down his cheek and left three red lines.

Then the whole line broke.

"Liar!"

"We sent our money to you!"

"We gave you a banquet!"

The guns came up, and the Brotherhood's men shoved them back into a row like cattle at a gate. Preston touched his cheek and stared at the blood on his fingers.

Serena did not move. She was not looking at Preston at all.

She was hearing a voice from the breakfast table. While the house praised Preston and his friends from the capital, the idiot had looked up from his plate and said, "The man on the television said it was a shadow."

Somebody had laughed. Nobody had listened. Nobody ever listened to him.

He had been the only one at that table who was right.

"Then who did?" Serena said quietly.

Nobody answered her.

Her eyes went, without her meaning them to, along the line to her husband. She thought of a wet jacket at dawn that smelled of rain and cedar.

The idiot was smiling at the coffin.

Impossible, she told herself, and put the thought away.

But Curtis Bennett had seen the smile too.

He turned his head very slowly. "What are you smiling at?"

"It's a very shiny box," Alex said helpfully. "Did he pick it himself?"

Somebody in the line made a strangled sound.

Curtis walked to him. He looked the idiot up and down, the stained waiter's jacket, the mild, empty eyes, and for the first time that night his politeness slipped.

"My brother is lying in that box," he said softly. "And this thing grins at him."

"I like shiny things," Alex said.

"I have buried better men than you, and I never once smiled at their coffins." Curtis's voice did not rise t went colder "You're not even a man. You're something your family forgot to drown." He looked past Alex to his right-hand man. "If it smiles at my brother again, take its teeth out."

Serena stepped in front of her husband.

"He doesn't understand," she said. Her voice was level, but her hands were pressed flat against her dress. "He doesn't understand any of this. Leave him alone."

Curtis studied her for a moment, and something like interest crossed his face. Then he turned his back on them both.

"You're worse than the idiot!" the aunt spat at Preston, holding her bleeding hand. "At least the idiot never lied to us!"

"You only have yourselves to blame!" Preston shouted back. "You believed me because you wanted to! Every one of you!"

"Enough," said Curtis.

He did not say it loudly. The hall went silent anyway.

Preston dropped to his knees on the stone. "Mr. Bennett, please." The tears ran into the scratches on his cheek. I'm nothing to do with these people to not one of them, never, touched your brother, I neve touched the harbour. I'm nobody!"

Curtis looked down at him as if he were something on his shoe.

"I don't care what you are to them," he said. "want the man who killed my brother. Give me his name, and you walk out of that door tonight. Keep lying, and you'll keep him company."

He laid his hand back on the coffin.

Preston's wet eyes crawled from face to face. The Baroness. Patricia. Serena, standing straight in front of her husband.

He licked the blood from his lip.

"I know who did it," Preston said.

"Who?"

"The idiot!"

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 820

"It was the idiot!"

Preston flung out his arm. His shaking finger pointed down the line, past Serena's shoulder, at the man behind her.

"Him! It was him!"

Alex looked over his own shoulder to see who Preston meant. There was only the wall. He turned back and gave Curtis a small, friendly wave.

"Listen to me!" Preston shuffled forward on his knees. "He was at the Grand! He was standing right there when your nephew's arm broke! And the night the harbour died, he went out and walked all night. All night! He came home at dawn soaked to the skin. Ask anyone in the house!"

For a heartbeat nobody in the hall made a sound.

Then a man by the stairs snorted. Another laughed out loud. The laugh went round the walls like a cold wind, and because they were frightened and it was safer to laugh, the Tiffanys laughed too.

"The idiot?" an aunt gasped. "He can't find his own shoes!"

Connor did not laugh. He looked at Alex for a long moment, and then his mouth twisted.

"Wait, him?" Connor squinted, realization dawning on his face. "Back at the Grand Hotel, he was just a waiter holding a tray."

"A waiter..." Curtis's gaze snapped to Alex like a predator locking onto prey. "You. Did you murder my brother?"

"Yes," Alex answered, the corner of his mouth curving into an easy smile.

The entire hall instantly went cold. A suffocating silence fell over the crowd.

Curtis surged forward, his aura flaring with hostile intent. "Stop playing games with me, boy! Give me an answer-did you kill him?!"

"I just told you: yes," Alex said with an amused nod. "Didn't the morning reports explain it clearly enough? They claimed a 'shadow' slaughtered them all at the docks. Well, look

down-I happen to have a shadow cast under my boots. That shadow must have butchered everyone at the harbor."

Both Curtis and Connor froze, speechless at his sheer insolence.

"You're playing with your own damn life!" Curtis barked, his face turning crimson. "I'll slaughter you and every last member of your family!"

"Mr. Bennett, wait! He isn't one of us!" the aunt screamed hysterically, throwing herself forward. "It's a fake marriage, only registered on paper! He doesn't even enter the main house-he sleeps out in the dog kennels!"

"We're innocent! Every one of us!"

"Look for him, not us!"

"I'll decide who is innocent," Curtis said. "Until I have my brother's killer, every one of you is guilty."

"We have never broken a law in our lives!" Gideon said hoarsely.

"Why did we ever let that idiot into the house?"

"I said so the day she married him," the Baroness said flatly. "Nobody listened."

Curtis was not laughing. Something moved in his face that was worse than laughing.

He walked back over, casting a long shadow across Preston's trembling frame. His eyes were completely void of emotion.

"Still refusing to confess? Still guarding your partner's name? That's fine by me."

"No! Wait! I swear to God!" Preston babbled, scrambling backward on all fours. "It was just a misunderstanding! Let me explain—"

"String him up," Curtis cut in, turning his back. "Start with the rope."

Two men took Preston under the arms. He kicked and screamed all the way to the iron hook in the great black beam above the hall.

"Lock the rest below," Curtis said. "Keep three." He pointed at Preston on the rope. Then at Patricia. "This one called the newspapers." Then he looked at Connor, and Connor nodded at Serena. "And her."

"Where are you taking them?" Serena asked.

"You should worry about yourself," said Curtis.

"Idiot! You'll get us all killed!" the aunt shrieked at Alex as the men drove the family toward a low door under the stairs. "You and your walks!"

At the top of the cellar steps Alex stopped. The man behind him shoved, and he did not move. Not much. Just enough.

"Excuse me," Alex said to the right-hand man, very politely. "Serena doesn't like the dark. Please leave a light on for her."

The right-hand man stared at him. Then he put one hand flat on the idiot's back and pushed him down the stairs.

The cellar door slammed. A bolt went across.

Serena's eyes burned. Two years she had lived in the dark, in the tower. In that whole house, he was the only one who had ever remembered.

They hung Preston first, and hauled on the rope until only his toes scraped the stone.

"Who stands behind your house?" Curtis asked.

"I don't know! I don't know anything!" Preston howled. "I cheated at cards at school! I scratched Gran's car and blamed the gardener! That's all I've ever done, swear

The whip whistled. Preston screamed louder than any of them had ever heard a grown man scream. On the second lash his head dropped onto his chest.

"He's out, boss."

"Leave him there."

Then Patricia. When the rope went round her wrists, all the sugar went out of her voice.

"Not me! Not me!" She twisted toward Serena. "Ask her! She called Victor all night! She knows who it was! She always knows everything! Ask her!"

"I'll get to her," Curtis said.

The whip came down. Patricia shrieked once, twice, and then hung sobbing, her silk torn open across her shoulders.

Serena last.

The rope bit into her wrists, rough and hot. When they hauled on it, the whole weight of her body hung from those two burning rings, and her shoes left the floor.

"Let me down," Serena said. Her voice shook, but only a little. "You have no right to do this."

"Right?" Curtis almost smiled. "You still don't understand where you are. Tonight your life is in my hand. I decide if you live." He stood beneath know. Who stands behind this house? Tell her. "Your cousin says you th me the truth, and I'll make it quick. Lie to me, and everyone in that cellar follows you."

Everyone in that cellar. Her husband was in that cellar.

Serena breathed in before she answered, the way she always did.

"I don't know."

"Think carefully."

"I don't know."

Curtis nodded to a man by the wall. The man stepped forward dragging a whip whose thongs were studded with iron spikes. They clicked on the stone floor like teeth.

The first lash landed across Serena's back with a crack like a branch breaking. Her dress tore. She bit down on her lip until she tasted blood, and made no sound.

The second. The third. On the fourth a scream tore out of her that she could not stop, and her whole body shook on the rope.

"Tell me," Curtis said.

Serena lifted her head. Sweat ran into her eyes. Her voice was a thread, but it did not bend.

"Don't stop," she said. "Hit harder."

Preston, waking on his rope, could not look. He turned his face to the beam.

Over by the staircase, a smug grin crept across Connor's face.

Snap.

The lights died instantly, swallowing the entire hall in pitch black. The power was cut clean, plunging the vast space into a suffocating void.

An unnatural chill crept along

Curtis's flank. Every hair on the back of his neck stood on end, a primal dread screaming insid parš škthat the Grim Reaper had just stepped into his personal space.