The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 831

"Mark Ellis is back."

Marissa said it to the whole Tiffany kitchen like news from the palace.

Serena did not look up from her tea. "Is he."

Mark Ellis. The boy with the very white teeth who had courted her for one summer, before the house married her off to Alex. He had stopped calling the week her mother died.

"Three years abroad, and he's come home rich," Marissa went on. "He's taking the whole family to dinner tonight, on the Seacrest's roof. And he asked for you specially."

At the end of the table, Gideon hid behind his newspaper. It was upside down. Nobody told him.

Marissa held out her phone for everyone to hear.

"Serena. It's Mark. I hear your mother's name isn't on her perfumes anymore. I want to put money behind them, under her own name again. Come to dinner and let me show you the numbers."

Her mother's name, on a bottle again. The promise she had made at her mother's bed. The one thing she could not say no to, and somehow Mark Ellis knew it.

"I'll come," she said. "For my mother. Not for him."

At the head of the table, the Baroness tapped her cane once on the floor. "A rich man wants something from this house. We'll all go. It's decided."

Patricia looked up from her nails. "Then I'll wear the green silk."

The Seacrest's roof hung over the black bay, where last night the Count had laughed at a man in a mask.

Mark was waiting by the lift in a pale suit. Patricia reached him first. His eyes went past her, straight to the drop of jade at Serena's throat.

"That's pretty. Market?"

"It was a gift."

"From your husband?" He smiled. "The famous idiot husband. I've heard so much."

A young waiter in a white jacket stepped in front of the velvet rope.

"I'm so sorry, madam. The roof is closed to the public tonight."

"Closed?" Marissa pointed past him. "There are people eating!"

"Members, madam. At nine o'clock the Count of Ashcliff signs this hotel over to its new owners, Halcyon. Tonight the roof is for our members and Halcyon's guests."

Preston pushed to the front. "Do you know who I am? I'm Preston Tiffany! I broke the Brotherhood! With my own bare hands!"

The waiter looked at Preston's hands. They were soft and pink, with a ring on every finger except the thumbs.

"Congratulations, sir. The roof is still for members."

The Baroness stepped forward on her cane. "Young man. We are the Tiffanys of Westmere."

"Yes, madam," the waiter said politely. "The roof is still for members."

"This is a restaurant, isn't it?" Marissa's voice rose. "You're supposed to serve people! Who are you to look down on us? Fine. Make us members. What does it cost?"

"A regular membership, madam, or a Deluxe?"

"Deluxe, of course! Do we look like we can't afford it?"

She whipped out her card and held it high. Mark Ellis was watching. She could not be small in front of Mark Ellis.

"The Deluxe tables by the glass need a deposit of five million dollars, madam."

The card went back into her bag so fast it bent.

"Five million? For soup?"

"It's very good soup, madam."

"And the regular one?"

"One million dollars."

"One million! Just to sit down!" Marissa's face went from pink to red. "That's robbery! Daylight robbery! We only want dinner, not the building. Let us in, and I'll see you get a very good tip."

"I'm sorry, madam. Members only."

"Then get me your manager!"

"The manager is with the Count's party tonight. I'm afraid he can't come."

Preston tugged her sleeve. "Mum. Let's just go somewhere else."

"And be laughed at all the way down in the lift? We're already here! Everyone's seen us!"

"Five million for a chair," the Baroness said, as if she were reading it off a bill. "That isn't business. That's theft."

It was true. Behind the rope, two women in silk had stopped eating to watch. One of them said something behind her hand, and the other one laughed.

Serena stood a little apart and looked at the bay. She counted the lights on the water. Eleven. Twelve. It was what she did when she wanted the ground to open, so that her face stayed still.

"Allow me, Mrs. Tiffany."

Mark stepped forward and drew a gold card from his breast pocket, holding it so the lamps caught it. "Gold member. Put us by the glass."

"Gold?" Marissa stared. "What does that cost?"

"Not much. Ten million to join." He smiled. "And twenty percent off everything after."

Ten million. Not much. Marissa's mouth opened and stayed open. Patricia slid her hand through Mark's arm, as if the card were half hers.

The waiter checked the card, and his smile grew twice as wide. "Please step inside, honoured guests!"

"Bootlicker!" Preston called after him. "My friend Mark is a Gold VIP! See that?"

Diners turned. At the next table, an old lady in diamonds looked at Preston over her spectacles until he stopped.

Marissa sailed in with her chest out and her chin up, as if she had paid for the bay.

They had just sat down by the glass when the lift opened again.

A young man stepped out in a brown jacket with a hole in the elbow. A woman's blue coat was folded carefully over one arm. He saw Serena, and his whole face lit up. "Serena! You forgot your coat. It's windy on roofs."

Every head on the roof turned.

Something tightened in Serena's chest. He remembered. He always remembered the small things, the cold, the dark. Nobody else in that house ever had.

Marissa closed her eyes. "Oh, no. How did you get up here?"

"In the lift," Alex said. "It goes up."

Mark Ellis looked him up and down. The jacket. The hole. The worn shoes. He smiled like a man who had just been handed a gift.

"So this is the husband." He leaned back in his chair. "Tell me, can you even afford a glass of water up here?"

Serena felt the heat climb her neck. Every face on the roof was on her husband now, and through him, on her.

"Do you know what it costs to stand on this roof?" Marissa hissed. "A million dollars. Just to sit down. Can you afford that?"

Alex thought about it honestly. "No. I don't have a million."

"He doesn't have a hundred!" Preston was on his feet, red-faced. "He's a beggar with a hole in his jacket! Halcyon gave him a job guarding the bins!"

"Then get out," said Marissa. "Go and look at yourself in a mirror. You're ruining everyone's appetite."

"Poor thing," said Patricia sweetly, loud enough for the next table. "Darling, the kennels are downstairs. Mark, don't look at him. He'll follow you home."

The Baroness did not even turn her head. "He's an embarrassment to this house. He always was."

Alex looked down at his jacket, as if it might explain itself.

At the end of the table, Gideon looked at his plate. He had looked at his plate like that for years.

"Oi! You!" Preston snapped his fingers at the young waiter. "Get this beggar out of here. Now!"

The waiter came over, slowly. "I'm sorry, sir. He came up in our lift. He's a guest, the same as you."

"The same as us? We are Gold VIPs! Is he more important than a Gold VIP? I'm giving you an order!"

"We have no rule like that, sir."

"Then I'll make a complaint," Marissa said. "I'll have your job by the morning."

The waiter's face went stiff. He looked at Preston, then at the brown jacket, and then he turned and hurried off across the roof.

"That's right, run!" Preston shouted after him. "Fetch somebody who knows who we are!"

At the next tables, people were looking at the Tiffanys now, and not kindly. Serena wanted to sink through the tiles. Instead she pressed her hands flat on the tablecloth so nobody would see them shake.

net'

Preston did not wait. He grabbed the blue coat and yanked. "Give that here. She doesn't need anything from you."

Alex did not let go. He held the coat very carefully, the way you hold something you have decided not to drop. He was still smiling. But Serena saw his eyes go once to Preston's hand, and stay there.

"Serena, sweetheart." Mark's voice was patient, sorry for her. "This is a business dinner. Your mother's name. You can't sit at this table with..." He opened one hand toward the jacket. "With that."

Serena stood up.

One moment she was in her chair, and the next she was on her feet between her husband and the whole staring roof, her palm flat on his chest.

"He's with me."

Mark laughed softly. "Serena. You're making a scene."

"You made it," she said. "I'm only standing in it. If he can't sit at your table, I'll sit somewhere else."

The young waiter came back with the manager, a small neat man with silver hair and a white carnation.

Preston stepped out to meet him, chest first. "At last. I'm Preston Tiffany. We're Mr. Ellis's guests. Gold. A beggar has sneaked onto your roof. Throw him off it." "Nobody sneaks onto this roof, sir," said the manager. "There is one lift, and my men stand at the bottom of it."

"Him!" Preston pointed. "Him!"

The manager looked. At the brown jacket. At the hole in the elbow. At the blue coat.

At the face. Something in his own face went very still.

"Sir," he said to Preston, quietly, "please do not play the fool with me."

Then he turned to the room and clapped his hands once, sharp as a gunshot.

"Seacrest staff! Attention!"

Twenty white jackets turned toward the glass. The manager bowed from the waist.

"Good evening, sir."

Twenty white jackets bowed with him, like wheat in one wind.

"Good evening, sir!"

A fork fell somewhere and rang on the tiles.

Alex looked behind him to see who they were bowing to. There was only the lift.

"Me?"

"You, sir."

"Oh." He bowed back, very deeply, nearly dropping the coat. "Good evening. Good evening, everybody."

Marissa made a noise like a balloon losing air. The Baroness's cane stopped halfway to the floor. Patricia's hand slid off Mark's arm.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the manager told the roof. "From nine o'clock tonight, the Seacrest belongs el.n?

to Halcyon. An hour ago Ms. Natasha Vale sent me her first order, before the papers. He turned to

Serena and bowed again, lower. "Halcyon's perfumer, Mrs. Serena Tiffany, and her husband are guests of this house. Always. Wherever Halcyon owns a door."

He looked once at the elbow. "Ms. Vale described them both very exactly. Down to the jacket."

"She told me it was a disgrace," Alex said happily.

Serena stood very still, her hand still on his chest.

Her name had done this.

Hers.

"Miss Serena, say the word and I'll have these people removed immediately. We can revoke their memberships on the spot."

"How dare you!" Patricia rose to her feet, bristling with indignation. "If you show deference to Serena, you owe ten times that respect to her you should be on your knees before this matriarch-and before her parents!"

grandmother! Every before

"Just who gave you the nerve to put on airs in front of me?"

Patricia lunged forward, her palm cracking violently across the manager's cheek.

She couldn't stomach it. If Serena received even an ounce of respect from anyone, Patricia made it her mission to burn it to the ground.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 832

Patricia's slap rang across the roof like a dropped plate.

Nobody moved. A waiter froze with a tray of glasses in his hands. At the next table, the old lady in diamonds slowly put down her fork.

The manager did not touch his cheek. A red handprint came up on it, one finger at a time.

"Did that hurt?" Alex asked him, worried. He held out his napkin. "You can have this. It's clean. Mostly."

"Thank you, sir. It's quite all right."

The manager turned to Patricia. He was still perfectly polite. That was the scary part.

"You asked who gave me the nerve, madam. Ms. Vale did. Her company, Halcyon, owns this hotel from tonight. And you have just slapped the manager of a Halcyon hotel, on a Halcyon roof, in front of Halcyon's guest." He lifted one hand. "Security." Two men in dark suits came from beside the lift. They were very big and very quiet. "Don't you dare touch me!" Patricia backed against her chair. "I'm a Tiffany! I'm Mr. Ellis's guest! Mark! Tell them!"

Mark Ellis looked out at the sea. He did not say one word for her.

The men took her by both arms. Patricia kicked. One green shoe flew off and slid under the next table.

"Grandmother! Grandmother, do something!"

"The young lady is not a member, and she has no card of her own," the manager said. "She may never come into a Halcyon hotel again. Not here, and not at the Grand. Take her out of the building. And slap her five times for the one she gave me."

They walked her to the lift. Her feet barely touched the floor. The doors closed on her scream, and the whole roof heard it go all the way down.

"How dare you treat a Tiffany like this?" said the Baroness, Serena's grandmother.

"What? Do you want to be thrown out too?" the manager said. "If you need someone to blame, blame yourself. You never taught your granddaughter how to act like a civilized human being."

The Baroness sat very still. Her cane lay across her knees. For the first time Serena could remember, her grandmother's hands were shaking.

"Nobody say a word," the Baroness said, very low. "This family has been laughed at enough for one night."

Serena's father, Gideon, looked at the Baroness. Then he looked at his daughter, standing guard over her husband. He turned his menu the right way up.

"I think I'll have the fish," he said.

"Miss Serena?" The manager turned to her as if nothing had happened. "Do you want me to remove them?"

"No," she said. "They're my family. Let them stay. And send their table a bottle of wine. On the house. Something good."

"As you wish, Miss Serena. Our best red."

Then the waiter came back from the till with a small silver tray. Mark's gold card lay on it. The waiter took it to the manager, not to Mark.

The manager stepped closer to Mark and spoke quietly. But the roof was so silent that everyone heard.

"Your card, sir. It is not yours. It belongs to a Mrs. Adele Crane, a widow in Calder. Last week she asked every good hotel on this coast to call her if anyone used it. So we will be calling her."

Mark kept smiling. But the colour drained out of his face, like a tide going out.

"Adele is a friend. A business friend. She lends it to me for..."

"Of course, sir. We'll tell her that."

Alex clapped slowly, three times. "Another lady's card, to pay for the Tiffany family's dinner?" he said, full of admiration. "That's very kind of her. You have very generous friends."

Mark's face went red. But before he could answer, Alex and Serena had already walked away to the next table.

A waiter brought the wine in a silver bucket full of ice, even though red wine does not need ice. For a long moment, nobody at the Tiffany table touched it.

"Living off Halcyon," Serena's stepmother, Marissa, hissed into her glass. "That's all she is now. And him? A leech clinging to a parasite. A freeloader married to a freeloader."

"A beggar's wife," said Preston. "Everybody knows it."

Then he looked at his glass. Then at his mother. Then he drank it all in one go.

"Preston!"

"What? It's free," said Preston. "And I haven't got a dollar."

Mark pushed his own glass an inch away with one finger, as if it smelled bad.

"Thank you, Serena," he called across to the next table, very proudly. "But I'm afraid I can't accept your gift."

Marissa grabbed at that like a rope. "You see? You see? That's class! Mark studied abroad. His family is older than the Tiffanys. He's worth ten of you, Alex. A hundred!"

"You're not good enough to carry his shoes," said Preston.

Mark waved it away, very modest. "You're too kind, Mrs. Tiffany. I was just lucky."

"Listen to him. So modest," Marissa told the table. "Serena, they're as different as night and day."

"I'm lucky too!" said Alex happily. "I'm always lucky. Ask anybody."

He leaned across the gap between the two tables, took Mark's full glass, and set it down in front of himself.

"That's my glass."

"You didn't want it," Alex explained. "So now it's lonely."

At nine o'clock the lift doors opened.

Rebecca Morgan stepped out first, dressed in black. Behind her came Natasha Vale, carrying a leather folder. Last came the Count of Ashcliff, leaning on a cane he did not need.

Last night, at this same table, the Count had made fun of God's Hand, the masked healer who said he would be dead in two days. He had even shaken hands on a bet with Rebecca's father, Thomas Morgan: if the masked man was right. Thomas Morgan would get the Count's medical company. A few hours later, the Count was dying. To get the one pill that saved his life, he had promised Halcyon this hotel.

Now he had come to pay. Last night he had called himself fit as a fiddle. Tonight he looked like a fiddle somebody had sat on.

Natasha opened the folder on the long table where he had made his toast. Nobody needed to be told to watch.

The Count sat down and picked up the pen. His hand shook so badly that his first line went crooked, and he had to start his name again.

He signed the paper that gave the Seacrest to Halcyon. Natasha turned the page. He signed the paper that gave his medical company to Thomas Morgan. He never looked up. Last night the whole roof had laughed along with him. Tonight nobody made a sound.

Under each of his names, Rebecca signed her own, as the witness. She dried the ink and gave the pen back to Natasha.

Natasha closed the folder. The manager bowed to her, not to the Count. The Count saw it, and stared down at the tablecloth.

At the Tiffany table, Marissa held her breath. The hotel she was sitting in now belonged to the company Serena worked for.

Rebecca looked around the roof for a white mask, the mask of the healer who had saved her father. She found none. Then her eyes passed over the idiot with his two glasses. And stopped.

She walked across, pulled out the empty chair beside him and sat down. She picked up the lonely glass in front of him and looked at him over the top of it for a long moment.

"You have a very handsome face, you know," she said. "Whatever your name is." "Thank you," said Alex. "I wash it."

On his other side, Serena put her own glass down very carefully.

Then Rebecca turned and looked at the Tiffany table. At the man in the pale suit with the shining smile.

"Mark Ellis," she said.

Mark's smile came up at once, bright and easy. "Miss Morgan. What a pleasure. I don't think we've..."

"We haven't met. But all of Calder has heard of you." Rebecca turned the lonely glass slowly in her fingers. "Your family lost all its money years ago. You kept the nice suits and the smile, and you started finding rich women instead. Lonely ones. You spend one woman's money to win the next woman's trust. And when you leave, they have nothing. Some of them have less than nothing."

The roof had gone so quiet that Serena could hear the sea.

"Two years on Adele Crane's money," Rebecca went on. "Her house. Her car. Her card. Does she know you're up here tonight, chasing another woman?"

The old lady in diamonds put down her fork. "Ha!" she said.

Mark stood up. His chair scraped. "I think I'll be going."

"I think you will," said Rebecca.

Marissa caught at his sleeve. "Mark, darling, the perfumes! You promised the money for us, for Serena!"

He shook her off without looking down.

Serena sat very still, her hand on the jade at her throat. Mark had promised to put money behind her dead mother's perfumes, with her mother's name on the bottles again. He had used her mother like a key to get close to her. And she had almost let him, because she wanted it so much.

Mark walked to the lift. Then he came back, bent down beside her chair and put his mouth close to her ear.

"I came back for you, Serena," he said, so low that nobody else could hear.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 833

Serena still had the jade on in the morning.

She sat on the end of Alex's narrow bed in the garage wing, dressed for work, and touched it twice while she put on her shoes. She said nothing about the roof, or about what Mark Ellis had whispered in her ear.

The garage wing smelled of warm toast and old dog, and he was busy with the toast.

Then her phone rang, and her whole face changed.

"Nora? Nora Hale? Is that really you?" She listened, and laughed out loud. "You're joking. Here? Today?"

Alex looked up. He had not heard his wife laugh like that in a long time.

"I can't believe it. Nora, my best friend, is coming here."

"Nora?" Alex asked.

"Nora was my best friend at school, and we worked together at a perfume company in the capital. Before the tower. Before everything." She stopped for a moment. "Her family are the Hales. A big old family. Big money. Hotels, restaurants, half the capital's shops."

"Why would a Hale come to Westmere?" Alex asked.

"Family business." Serena lowered her voice, though there was nobody to hear but the dog. "For years her family wanted the old group that owned the hotels and the factories here. The papers were ready. Then one night somebody bought the whole thing out from under them, with cash, and called it Halcyon." She shook her head. "Nora wants to meet the new owner. She wants to buy it."

"Why would she tell you that?"

"She tells me everything. That's what best friends are for." Serena laughed. "She lands this afternoon, and she's coming straight here. To this house. To see me."

Her phone buzzed again, and her smile fell.

"Oh no. Halcyon. The contract papers. They need my signature this morning, in person." She stood up and grabbed her bag. "It's one signature, Alex. One. I'll be back long before Nora gets here, I promise."

"I'll wait at the gate."

"And if she comes before me..." Serena stopped in the doorway. "Please treat her well. Be nice to her. Don't let the family eat her alive. If I'm late, take her somewhere nice for dinner." She held out her bank card. "Take this. Don't be afraid to spend. She's used to the best."

Alex gently pushed her hand back.

"Keep it. I have a job now."

"The security?" Serena said slowly.

"I get paid."

"Fine." Serena laughed and put the card away anyway. She kissed the top of his head, quickly, like she was surprised at herself, and went.

Alex sat alone with the cold toast.

People spend years saving for big days, he thought. But what makes a person laugh like that is small.

A voice on the phone.

Somebody you thought you had lost, saying your name.

He took out his cheap phone and typed to Natasha.

"Serena's friend comes today. A table for dinner, in case."

The grand restaurant. The Diamond Room. N.

Then a second line came.

Miss Hale has written to Halcyon twice, sir. She asks to meet the owner. She wants to buy. N.

Alex looked at the cold toast for a long moment.

'I don't sell,' he typed.

Time passed and Serena did not come back.

At noon her message came: Still here. They keep finding more pages. So sorry. Be nice to Nora.

Later: Another meeting. I'll come as soon as I can.

Alex waited at the gate from lunch on. At four, a white car stopped there.

A young woman stepped out in a white coat, with chestnut hair and dark glasses pushed up on her head. As beautiful as Serena, in a louder way, she looked up at the old house like she was thinking of selling it.

"You must be Serena's husband! The famous Prince!" She shook his hand. "Serena says you'll look after me until she escapes."

"This way," said Alex. "We live across the yard, by the kennels. Mind the dog. He's friendly. He just doesn't know it."

Three steps later, the front door of the main house flew open.

"Miss Hale!"

Preston came halfway down the steps and stopped dead. For a moment he forgot to close his mouth.

"You're... you're even more beautiful than they say," Preston breathed.

Then he came down the rest, in his best suit. Patricia came behind him in big sunglasses and heavy make-up, over cheeks still pink from last night's five slaps.

"Miss Hale, welcome to the Tiffany house!" Preston pushed between them, so Alex had to step back onto the cobbles. "Don't go over there. That's the garage. He sleeps next to the dogs. He looked down at Alex "You. You're not needed. Go back to your bins, boy."

"Serena asked him to look after me," said Nora.

"Serena isn't here," Patricia said sweetly, and took Nora's other arm. "We are. Come inside, darling. Grandmother is dying to meet you."

Then she let Nora go ahead up the steps, pulled Preston back, and hissed, so only Alex, behind them, heard Grandmother said marry her, Preston. After last night the whole coast is laughing at us. A Hate on your arm stops every mouth in Westmere."

"How did Grandmother even know she was coming?"

"Aunt Marissa heard Serena shrieking on the phone across the yard this morning, stupid. And Grandmother paid ten thousand for the gold room at the Grand tonight, so don't you waste it."

Preston stared at her. "The Grand?"

"Grandmother booked it in your name, not mine." Patricia touched her big sunglasses.

Preston swallowed his temper like a bad oyster and smiled wider.

"And remember," Patricia whispered. "Charles comes today."

"Your count."

"My count. Real money, Preston. A real title. He sent me a diamond as big as a quail's egg, and he's never even met Grandmother." Patricia looked at the gate. "Today he does."

Nora turned on the top step as a black car came up the drive. Out stepped a man in a camel coat, with a thin moustache and rings on all ten fingers. Even the thumbs. Sweet cologne came with him.

"Charles!" Patricia ran. "Charles, darling, you came!"

"My dear." Count Charles kissed the air. He looked at Nora. "A Hale, if I'm not mistaken. Capital girls. You can always tell."

Preston jumped in before the count could say more. "Miss Hale, knowing you were coming, I booked a table tonight at the finest restaurant on the coast. Grandmother insisted. The car is ready."

"That's very kind." Nora came back down the steps to Alex. "But Serena texted me. If she's late, I'm eating with her husband tonight. Serena asked him, and I always do what Serena says."

Preston's smile stayed. Everything behind it went red.

"Of course." Then he laughed, loudly, so the whole yard could hear. "I only mention it because of where I booked. The Grand. The gold room. Ten thousand dollars. And that's only the room."

Nora's eyebrows went up.

Preston turned to Alex with a big grin.

"And you, cousin? Where are you taking Miss Hale? I hope it's not the soup kitchen.

It would be a shame to insult a Hale on her very first night."

Count Charles turned a ring and laughed.

"The Grand," he said. "The finest table on the coast. I know it well. Don't worry about tables, young man. When the owner hears a count of the capital is in his house, the owner will come to my table himself."

Every face in the yard turned to Alex, waiting.

In the cobbled yard, with the old hound barking somewhere behind the kennels, Preston was still grinning at him.

"Well? Cat got your tongue? Where's the great dinner?"

"The Grand," said Alex. "Me too. Same house."

For one second nobody spoke. Then Preston doubled over and had to grab the gatepost.

"Liar!"

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 834

"The same house! Did you hear that? The idiot has a table at the Grand!" He wiped his eyes. "You can't afford the bread there, boy. You can't afford the smell of the bread."

Across the cobbled yard, Patricia laughed behind her sunglasses. Even Count Charles laughed, high and thin, like a teacup knocking a saucer.

"A table at the Grand," the count said. "Do you know, I tried to book there myself once, from the capital. They told me to call back next year."

"I thought you knew it well," said Alex.

The count's ears went pink. "Know it, yes. Eaten there, no. One doesn't push."

"And which room did you book, cousin?" Patricia asked sweetly. "The one by the kitchen? The broom cupboard?"

Alex thought about it, very seriously.

"The lady said the Diamond Room."

Preston stopped laughing. Then he started again, louder.

"The Diamond Room! Do you know who eats in the Diamond Room? Not ten people on this coast have ever sat in it. The governor asked once and didn't get in! Grandmother couldn't get in, and she's a baroness!"

"Even I have never sat in it," said Count Charles.

"Hear that, boy? Not even a count!" Preston slapped the gatepost. "And you want to eat in it. With what? Dog biscuits?"

"He couldn't even eat its leftovers," said Patricia. "They'd throw them to the dogs first."

"The dogs are my friends," said Alex. "They'd share."

Nora said nothing at first.

She looked at his old jacket, at his old shoes, at his smile. She loved Serena more than anyone in the world. So she counted it up, to be fair.

"Let me see if I have this right," she said. "Your cousin has a car with a driver. He's paying for a gold room. You sleep next to the dogs, Alex. You were waiting at the gate in that jacket." She tilted her head. "And you have the Diamond Room." "Yes," said Alex.

"Do you think that sounds fair? Even to you?"

"It sounds lucky," Alex said. "I'm very lucky."

Nora smiled at him, but only with her mouth.

Even in the capital, people had heard the joke: the Tiffanys had married their blind girl to the family idiot, a man with nothing. Nora had not minded the nothing. Plenty of good men had nothing.

But this? Lying to his wife's cousins in their own yard, so they wouldn't laugh at him?

He wants to look big, she thought. Serena married a man who would rather lie than be laughed at.

What a disappointment.

"There's no need to fight about it," she said brightly. "If we're all going to the same house, let's all go together. Alex, you'll ride with us."

"Ha! Fine." Preston opened the car door wide. "For Miss Hale's sake, I'll feed you tonight. Come and see what a real restaurant looks like, cousin."

In the long black car, Alex sat squeezed against the door, across from Count Charles. He looked at the count's rings for a long time.

"Count Charles," he said politely. "Did your diamond get home safely? The big one, like an egg. There was a man in a brown suit waiting by it, at the wedding. He said you rent it."

The count's smile stopped. For one moment nobody in the car breathed.

"It is in a vault," Count Charles said. "In the capital. Where it belongs."

"Don't talk to him, darling," Patricia said, and squeezed his arm. "He thinks the moon is a cheese."

"Isn't it?" asked Alex.

The sun was going down when they reached the Grand. Not the Grand Hotel up the hill, which Halcyon had bought: the Grand restaurant, older, the biggest table on the coast. It stood above the harbour like it had been there before the sea: white stone, tall old windows, a great brass door, and over it the old carved name. Fishing boats creaked against the quay below. The air smelled of salt, smoke and something roasting slowly in butter.

Alex breathed it in. Serena would like this smell, he thought. One day he would bring her up to the roof garden, when nobody was watching.

"For you, Miss Hale," said Preston, "only the best." He looked back at Alex. "Have a good long look, cousin. Some people only get through d doors like this because somebody better holds them open."

"Thank you for holding it," said Alex while passing the door.

At the top of the steps stood a big man in a black suit, with a silver ring through one ear and a scar like a centipede from the corner of his eye down to his chin. A short black stick rested on his shoulder like an umbrella: This was Bram who kept the Grand's door. Everyone on the coast knew the Grand belonged to the Vales, and that the Vales' men were something worse than security men. Nobody said it loudly.

Bram looked down at his big book. "Booking."

"The Diamond Room," Alex said helpfully. "For Serena's friend."

Preston rolled his eyes. "The gold room. Preston Tiffany."

"Gold room, Tiffany. Yes." Bram's eyes lifted and stopped on Patricia's big sunglasses, for one breath too

And long. Then his finger moved on And the Diamond Room. Ms. Vale's guest."

Patricia turned her face away, then brightened. "Of course! A Hale in town. Ms. Vale must be buttering her up."

"So the owner knows I'm here," said Nora, surprised.

One of Bram's men looked at Alex, and his face changed. He had stood on the Seacrest roof last night when the whole staff bowed to this man and his wife. He began to bow.

Alex gave him the smallest shake of the head.

The man stopped halfway and turned it into a cough.

"This way, please." Bram stayed at the door. His man led them in.

The count beamed. "You see, my dear? They know a count when they see one."

"Or they know me," said Preston, very modest. "A man doesn't need to show off who he knows."

"Preston!" Patricia squeezed his arm. "Since when do you know the Vales?"

"Since when does a gentleman tell?"

Nora looked at Preston again. Maybe Serena's cousin had friends in this town. Next to him, Serena's husband had nothing at all.

Alex looked at the boats. One message, and this whole house would bow. He did not send it.

The man led them up a wide marble stair to a dark old door with a silver diamond set in it.

"Not the gold room?" said Preston. "The Vales have upgraded us. For Miss Hale."

"The Diamond Room," the man said, and held out a slip of card and a silver pen to Alex. "The house asks the guest to sign, sir."

"Put that pen down!"

Preston snatched it so fast the ink flicked across Alex's sleeve.

"Who's paying tonight? You?" He grabbed the slip. "You don't sign anything here."

The man looked at Alex: Shall I throw him out?

Nora was Serena's friend. A fight at the door would spoil her first night.

"It's all right. He likes signing."

Preston pressed the slip against the wall and wrote across it in big proud letters, so

Nora could see every one.

Preston Tiffany.

"There. Now everybody knows whose dinner this is."

The man looked at the name like a stranger's death notice.

"Yes, sir," he said quietly. "Now everybody will know."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 835

The Diamond Room was one long black table, twelve chairs and a wall of glass over the harbour. The last of the sun lay red on the water below.

Preston put Nora at the head of the table, the count on her right and himself on her left. Patricia sat beside her count.

Alex took the chair in the corner, next to the bread basket.

The food came without anyone ordering it. Lobster on ice.

Oysters in a silver bowl. A whole fish baked in salt, cracked open at the table, so the smell of lemon and the sea came up into the room.

Then a bottle of wine so old that its label had gone brown.

Count Charles turned the bottle to read it, and his moustache went very still.

"Preston," he said quietly. "What did your grandmother pay for the room?"

"Ten thousand." Preston leaned back. "Why?"

"This bottle alone costs more than your whole room."

Preston's face slipped. He looked at the lobster. He looked at the door. "They... they must know who I am. I am a hero for people around here. A savior."

Nora lifted her glass to him. "Preston. Thank you. This is beautiful."

"For you, Miss Hale," he said, smiling again, "this is nothing."

He turned in his chair. "Alex! You've never eaten like this in your life, have you?"

Alex had a piece of bread in each hand. "I had a very good soup once."

"Soup!" Preston laughed so hard that the count had to laugh too. "Listen to me. If you ever ate a meal like this before tonight, I'll cut off my own head and kick it into the sea."

"Please don't," said Alex. "It's a long way down."

Patricia set down her fork. "Don't be smart with Preston. You're eating his food, in his room. One more clever word, and you can eat in the car with the driver."

The door opened softly. A grey-haired man in a black waistcoat came in with a bottle held in both hands, the way people carry a sleeping baby. Silver keys hung from his belt.

"Good evening. I keep the Grand's cellar," he said. "With the house's compliments. The best bottle in my cellar, for the honoured guest of this room."

Patricia gasped. Count Charles was already on his feet, buttoning his camel coat over his rings.

"The house's compliments," he told the table warmly. "Naturally. A capital count at the Grand's best table, on his first night. Only a house of real class knows how these things are done."

"Charles!" Patricia's eyes shone. "You said the owner would come to your table!"

"The owner sends his bottle first, my dear. That is how it's done." The count held out both hands.

"Leave it to me, my good fellow. You've done very well."

The cellar master did not give him the bottle.

"Forgive me, sir. The guest I'm honouring tonight isn't you." He looked down the long table. "Which of you is Miss Hale?"

The room went so quiet they could hear the boats against the quay.

Nora lifted her hand. The cellar master bowed, poured her glass, then walked past the count and Preston to the corner.

"And Mr. Alex?"

Alex looked up from the bread, his ears going warm. Too much, Natasha, he thought. "Me. Sorry."

He set the bottle beside Alex's bread basket and poured. "The booking says Miss Hale and Miss Serena's husband, sir. The two of you are served before anyone else."

"Does it go with bread?"

"Everything goes with bread, sir."

Alex smiled at Preston. "Preston, you don't have to cut off your head. It's a long way down to the sea."

Preston went white.

In the yard, Nora had decided he was lying to look big.

He had not lied.

Then she understood, or thought she did: Serena worked with Halcyon now, and had asked a favour for her best friend and her husband. Alex was only repeating what he had been told.

Serena, she thought. Of course it was Serena.

The count's hands were still out. "There's some mistake. I am the count."

"No mistake, sir. Even you are a count. Mr. Alex here is a Prince."

Slowly the count put his hands in his pockets, and sat down.

"You can have my leftovers, Count Charles." Alex pushed his bread down the table to him. "The dogs won't mind."

Patricia went scarlet, because those had been her own words in the yard.

"He paid him!" Patricia's voice cracked. "He paid the old man to put on a show! With Serena's money! To steal your room in front of Miss Hale!"

"You are right!" Preston was on his feet. "Listen, old man. This room is mine. I signed for it!"

"You signed, sir? May I see?"

The cellar master read the slip twice, like a man watching a car speed toward a wall.

"I'll show this to Mr. Bram." He went out.

"Good," said Preston. "Let's see who Bram believes."

"It's going to get busy," said Alex, buttering more bread.

Then they heard feet in the marble hall. Many feet, running.

The door hit the wall so hard that the glass shook.

"Who let you people in this room?"

Bram filled the doorway, the slip in one hand and the short black stick in the other.

Behind him came a dozen men in black, with scarred knuckles and flat eyes. They walked in without a word and stood behind the chairs, at the glass, at the door. Patricia's fork rang on her plate.

"Preston Tiffany," Bram read off the slip, and looked straight at him. "I gave you the gold room."

Preston stood up straight. "They upgraded us! It's my room now. What do you mean, bursting in on my guests?"

"Bring him."

Two men took Preston under the arms and dragged him round the table. "Let go of me! Do you know Who am one of them kicked the fam? back of his knee, and Preston dropped onto the marble in front of Bram.

Bram threw the slip in his face. It hit his forehead and fell into his lap.

"Who said you could upgrade for this room?"

"It's a mistake! We paid for the gold room! My grandmother paid ten thousand..."

"Gold room?" Bram slapped him, once, with the back of his hand. "This is the Diamond Room. It's booked for Miss Nora Hale by Mr. Alex. And you put your name across it like it's your bar bill."

"Preston!" Patricia was on her feet. "Tell him who you are!" She pointed at Bram, "He's the hero of the harbour! He killed Victor Russell! He broke the whole Brotherhood alone, How dare you hit him!"

Bram went very still. Since the Brotherhood fell, this harbour had answered to the

Oscar.

"The man who broke the Brotherhood." He looked down at Preston. "And tonight he walks into a Vale house and puts his name on Miss Hale's room. You came to break us too?"

He hit Preston again, harder, and then again, until Preston's nose was bleeding onto the marble.

"No! No!" Preston screamed. "I never broke anybody! I didn't kill Victor Russell! I was drunk in my own bed! I was just passing by, I swear!"

"But you said..."

Nora put her glass down slowly. The hero of the harbour. All of it, bragging.

Bram spat on the marble beside Preston's knee. "A hero who signs other people's rooms." He turned to his men. "Put his hand on the table. I am gonna break it"

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 836

Two men pinned Preston's right hand flat on the table.

"The gold room costs ten thousand," Bram said. "This room costs a hundred thousand. You eat a hundred-thousand dinner on a ten-thousand ticket? You came here to rob us?"

"No! Please! I'll pay for all of it!"

Bram brought the stick down.

The crack was louder than the scream. "My hand! My hand!" Preston slid to the marble, his good trousers dark and wet.

Nora ran round the table and pressed in behind Alex, both hands in his old jacket. "Are they allowed to do that?" she whispered. "Are they allowed to kill people here?" "No one will touch you while I'm here," said Alex.

He had a bread roll in his hand. Nora almost laughed. But her fingers stayed in his jacket.

Bram turned to the count. "And you. My man says you told everyone they knew a count when they saw one."

Count Charles stood up very straight, all ten rings shaking. "Do you know who I am? I am Count Charles of the capital! One call from me, and this whole house..."

"Count of what?"

"Of... of the capital!"

From behind Alex's shoulder, Nora's voice came out small, but clear. "There is no Count Charles in the capital. I know every titled house there. My grandmother made me dance with all their sons."

"That's a lie!" the count squeaked. "Patricia, tell them!"

Patricia said nothing at all.

"A fake count," said Bram. "In Miss Hale's room."

The stick came down on the count's head. He slid to the floor, and his rings rolled across the marble, brass under the gold paint.

Bram turned to Patricia. With the end of the stick he lifted the big sunglasses off her face. Under the make-up, last night's slaps still showed pink.

"Patricia Tiffany," he said. "Ms. Vale's people threw you out of the Seacrest." He dropped the glasses and stepped on them. "And tonight you sit in this room behind a pair of glasses."

"My grandmother booked it! I'll call the police! I'll..." Patricia had her phone out, stabbing at it.

"Take the phone. Shut her mouth."

"Yes, Mr. Bram," said a one-eyed man, smiling.

He grabbed her hair and slapped her, backhand, forehand, again and again. Last night they had counted five. Tonight nobody counted.

"Stop! Please!" Patricia slid down the glass with her hands over her swelling face.

Bram wiped his stick on the tablecloth. Then he turned to the corner, where Nora stood behind Alex with both hands in his jacket, and he lowered his head.

"Miss Hale. Mr. Alex." His voice was suddenly quiet. "Forgive the noise at your table. Nobody in this house will touch you."

Nora let out a breath she had not known she was holding.

"Bram!"

The voice from the door cracked like a shot.

A young man stood in the doorway in a dark grey suit.

Oscar Vale, Natasha Vale's little brother. The Grand was his, and half the harbour, and since the Brotherhood fell the rest answered to him.

The owner had come to the table after all.

"You broke hands in this room? At Mr. Alex's table? In front of Miss Hale, while she eats?"

"Sir Oscar, the Tiffany boy signed..."

Oscar crossed the room and kicked Bram behind the knee. Bram went down.

"Did Mr. Alex ask you who signed?" Another kick. "Down. All of you. On your knees."

Every man in black knelt. Bram looked up at the man with the bread basket, and his face went grey.

Oscar turned to the corner and bowed his head. "Miss Hale. Sir.

Sorry for the trouble." Then he looked at the three on the floor And these three, sir? Are they with you?"

you?

Alex looked at Preston, who had called him boy at the gate, and at Patricia, who had told him to eat in the car.

"I only brought Serena's friend to dinner," said Alex. "They're not with us."

Nora stared at him.

"Then they're nobody's," said Oscar. "Take them downstairs. Hit them again. The ambulances come to the back door."

"Alex!" Preston screamed as two men lifted him, his broken hand swinging. "Cousin! Tell him we're family! Alex! Tell him!"

"We're family!" Patricia sobbed through her swollen mouth. "Alex, please!"

The door swung shut on Patricia's scream. Then the Diamond Room was quiet, except for the sea below.

Oscar snapped his fingers. Fresh plates came in, hot lobster and new bread, and a cloth was laid over the mess on the floor as if it had never been there.

"This room is yours, Miss Hale," said Oscar. "Any night you want it. Mr Alex's word." He bowed again. mad wen out, and every one of his men went with him and closed the door.

Alex sat down in the corner and held out the bread basket. "It's warm again."

Nora laughed, a little shakily, and took a piece. For the first time that night, they ate in peace.

"Alex," Nora said, "were you scared?"

He thought about it seriously. "Of the lobster, a little. It looks at you."

Nora laughed so hard she had to put her glass down. "Serena said you were funny. She never said how funny."

"Serena says I'm a very good guard." He passed her the butter. "Only not in the dark."

"Then we'll keep the lights on." She tore her bread in half and gave him the bigger piece. "Eat. Your cousin signed for all of this, remember?"

"Preston is very generous," said Alex, with his mouth full.

"Very," said Nora, and laughed until her eyes were wet.

Then, out of nowhere, the great window burst.

Glass sprayed across the table. Out of the dark, four men in black swung in through the broken window, guns and knives in their hands.

"There's Nora Hale. Take her."

Nora ran behind Alex. He stood slowly, still holding the bread basket, and found himself alone in front of four armed men. All four were looking at him.

"Move. We only want the woman. You can walk away."

Alex shook his head. "No. She's my guest. She came with me, so she goes home with me. That's the rule when you take a lady out to dinner."

"You think this is funny?" one of them said. "Kill him."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 837

In the Diamond Room, the great window lay in pieces across the table, and the bright noon light came pouring through the hole with the cold wind off the harbour, salt and broken glass.

Nora had both hands in Alex's old jacket. She could feel him breathing, slow and easy.

"Get the girl," one of the men said.

The man with the gun stepped over the glass, the sun flashing on the barrel. He looked at Alex's face, then past his shoulder at Nora's white coat.

"There you are, Miss Hale," the man said, almost kindly. "Come out now. Nobody wants to spoil that pretty face. Your father pays, you go home. Simple."

"I'm not going anywhere with you," Nora said. "My father won't pay a cent to men like you."

"Everybody's father pays," said the man. "Ten million, and you're home for supper. Twenty if you scream."

"I'll pay you myself." Her voice cracked. "My bag. It's on the table. Take it. Take my cards. Take my watch. Just go."

"Hear that, boys? She's bargaining." Somebody laughed behind him. "Cards they can stop in a minute. A Hale girl they can't."

"Please..."

"Tie her hands," said the gun. "Tape her mouth. We go down the way we came. Rope's still on the balcony."

Behind them Nora saw the rope hanging outside the broken window, swinging in the wind, and the long drop to the rocks and the glittering water below.

"No," she whispered. "No, no, no. I can't. I can't go down that."

"You'll go down it on my back, sweetheart, or you'll go down it without the rope," the man said. "Your choice."

Her knees went to jelly. If Alex had not been in front of her, she would have fallen. "Enough talk. Come here."

A hand shot past Alex and closed on her wrist. Nora screamed. It pulled, hard, and her shoulder burned, and her heels slid on the wet marble.

"Let go of me!"

Then the hand was gone. Alex had taken it off her, the way an adult takes a cup out of a child's fingers. She never saw him move.

The gunman's eyes jumped back to his face.

"A waiter with a bread basket," the man with the gun said. He was not laughing now. "Last time. Get out of the way."

"Alex, please," Nora whispered into his back. "Just go. They don't want you. They want me."

"I know," said Alex. "That's the problem."

"You hear that?" the gunman said to the others. "He knows. The waiter knows."

"As long as I'm here," said Alex, "nobody touches her."

"Then die."

The gun came up, black and close, right at Alex's chest.

Nora shut her eyes. She could not watch him die.

She heard the bread basket fly. A grunt. Metal skidded over marble.

Something heavy crashed onto the table, and oysters went everywhere, cold against her ankles.

A body hit the glass wall and slid down it, squeaking. A gun went off once, into the ceiling, and plaster rained into her hair.

Her hands were holding his jacket.

Then her hands were holding nothing.

"Alex?" Her voice came out tiny. "Alex, where are you? Alex!"

Somebody screamed, short, and stopped. Then there was only the wind, and the sea, and her own heart.

"I'm here," he said, right beside her. "Mind the glass. Your shoes are too nice for it." Nora opened her eyes.

In the sunlight, four men in black lay among the oysters and the broken crystal. None of them moved. One was wearing the silver bread basket on his head like a hat.

"What happened to them?" she breathed. "Alex. What happened?"

"I think they slipped," said Alex. "It's very wet in here. Somebody spilled a lot of wine."

"All four of them slipped?"

"It was a lot of wine."

The door crashed open. A dozen men in black poured in, and Oscar Vale behind them, his gun out and his face like chalk.

"Miss Hale!" Oscar's eyes found her. "Are you hurt? Tell me you're not hurt."

"I'm... no." Nora touched her hair. Plaster came away on her fingers. "No. I don't think so. Who were they? What did they want?"

"Me, I'm afraid, Miss Hale," said Oscar. "They wanted to embarrass my house. Nobody touches a guest of the Grand. Nobody. You have my word."

Oscar's eyes went to the four on the floor, and then, for one second, to the man standing in front of her with butter on his sleeve. He looked away at once.

"Take them downstairs," Oscar snapped. "All four. Find out who they work for." They carried the four out like sacks of wet sand. One of them was crying.

Oscar turned back to Nora and bowed. "Miss Hale. Mr. Alex. You can't sit in this. There is glass in the soup." He held out his arm toward the door. "The other Diamond Room is at the top of the house. It's ready for you. Everything fresh. Please, let me finish your lunch properly."

At the door Nora stopped and looked back.

The silver bread basket lay on its side by the table, with a deep dent in it, as if it had hit something very hard. One of the guns lay all the way over by the door, at her feet, twelve long steps from where any of the four had fallen.

She looked at the gun. Then at Alex's back, going out ahead of her into the corridor. She said nothing at all.

In the corridor, voices were already running past them.

"Did you hear?" a waiter was saying. "Four killers, through the window!"

"For the Hale girl!" a cook answered. "Mr. Oscar's boys got there in time. Took all four down before they got off more than one shot!"

"Mr. Oscar's boys are the best on the whole coast," said a third voice. "Everybody knows that."

Alex let them.

The second Diamond Room sat at the very top of the Grand, round, all glass, with the whole harbour spread out below it in the sun. The table was already laid. Fresh lobster Hot bread. A bottle of the cellar master's best, already breathing.

Nora sat down with her brandy and her borrowed coat and stared out at the boats.

Her hands were still shaking. She did not touch her fork.

Oscar poured Alex's wine himself, and bent low beside his chair, as if to straighten the napkin.

"Kidnappers, sir," he said, very low. "Nobody sent them. They read in the papers that a Hale had landed in Westmere, and they wanted her ransom. A Hale girl is worth millions."

"Then they picked the wrong lunch," said Alex, just as low.

Oscar's mouth twitched. He bowed and went out.

Nora had heard none of it. She was still looking down at the water, where the police boats were coming in under the window that was not there any more.

It was late afternoon before the police had finished asking her questions, and the sun was low over the harbour when her driver brought the car round.

In the back of taxi, on the harbour road home, the heater hummed and the low sun flashed off the water.

"Alex." She turned to him. "I was holding your jacket. And then I wasn't. Where were you?"

"Under the table," he said. "With the bread."

"And the gun by the door?"

"Somebody must have thrown it," said Alex. "People throw things when they slip."

She looked at him for a long time. He looked back, mild and polite, with a crumb still on his sleeve.

"I thought you were lying at the gate today," she said quietly. "About the room. About everything. I'm sorry."

"Don't tell Serena about that," he said. "She'll worry."

"I won't," said Nora.

Neither of them believed the other.

In the Tiffany yard, at dusk, every light was already on. Alex smelled it before he saw it: antiseptic, petrol, and the old hound's wet fur from the kennels by the wall.

An ambulance stood by the front steps. On a stretcher lay Preston, his right arm in plaster to the elbow, his nose taped flat. Patricia came behind him, a towel full of ice on her face. One eye was swollen shut. The other found Alex at once.

Marissa came running down the steps in her dressing gown. "Preston! My nephew!

What did they do to you?"

"Ask him!" Patricia's voice was thick through her swollen mouth. She pointed across the yard. "Ask the idiot! He sat there eating lobster with the Hale girl while they broke Preston's hand! He watched! He didn't lift one finger!"

"He told them we weren't family!" Preston wept from the stretcher. "Grandmother, he told them we were nobody's!"

On the top step, the Baroness stood in black with her silver cane. She tapped it once on the stone. The yard went quiet, even the dogs.

"Is this true?"

"I took Serena's friend to lunch," said Alex. "Like Serena asked me."

"You let them beat your wife's family."

"Preston signed a room that wasn't his," said Alex. "I don't sign things. I'm not allowed."

Patricia made a noise like a kettle coming to the boil.

"Grandmother, it wasn't his fault," said Nora, getting out of the car. "If anything, he..."

"Thank you, Miss Hale. Go inside and rest." The Baroness did not look at her. She looked down at Alex the way she looked at a stain on a tablecloth. "From tonight you sleep in the kennels with the dogs. For good. Is that clear?"

"It's always clear," said Alex.

"And who pays for the hospital?" Marissa rounded on him, her slippers slapping the stones. "Plaster! An ambulance to the door! Who pays for all that? You?" "Preston's grandmother paid ten thousand for his room," said Alex. "Maybe the hospital is cheaper."

"Don't you be smart with me!"

"It's worse, Grandmother." Patricia lowered the towel from her face, and the swollen eye looked even worse in the yard lights. "The Vales threw us out the back door. Like rubbish. In front of the whole Grand. Do you know what that means? No Tiffany will ever get a table there again. Not you. Not any of us. Because of him."

For the first time, the Baroness's cane did not move.

"Barred," she said. "From the Seacrest last night. And now the Grand."

"Because of him!"

Down at the bottom of the steps, Gideon had come out in his reading glasses, a book still under his arm. He cleared his throat.

"Mother," he said softly, "the boy only went to lunch. Serena asked him to. Maybe we should hear..."

"Sit down, Gideon."

Gideon sat down on the bottom step, exactly where he stood. He opened his book again, though he did not read it.

"Pauline." The Baroness did not turn her head. "Have his bed carried out."

"Of course, Mother."

That was when the gate opened again.

Headlights swept the yard. A black Halcyon car rolled to a stop by the fountain, and the driver opened the back door.

Serena stepped out in her work coat, a leather folder held tight against her chest.

Her eyes went from Preston, to Patricia's face, to the Baroness on the step, and last of all to Alex, alone in the middle of the yard.

"What's going on?" she said. "Preston? Patricia, your face! Alex, are you all right?"

"Are you all right?" Patricia mimicked through her swollen mouth. "Ask him what he did, Serena! Ask your idiot!"

"Your husband," said the Baroness, "sleeps in the kennels from tonight. For good."

Serena looked down at the folder in her arms. Then she lifted her chin.

"No, Grandmother," she said. "He isn't."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 838

In the Tiffany yard, under every light in the house, nobody moved. Even the ambulance men had frozen with Preston's stretcher halfway up the steps.

"He isn't?" The Baroness said it the way she named a price she would not pay. "Since when do you tell me what happens in my house?"

"Since tonight, Grandmother."

Serena crossed the stones and stood beside Alex. She did not look at him. She held the leather folder in both hands, tight enough to bend it.

"Can we do this inside? Or do you want the neighbours to hear it too?"

The Baroness's eyes cut across the street. The neighbours were already out on their steps, craning their necks, drawn by the ambulance lights. By morning, the Tiffany house would be the joke of the whole town.

She pivoted hard on her cane and marched inside. The family fell in behind her, the way they always did.

In the long dining room, the dinner candles had burned down to stubs.

The Baroness took the head of the table. Pauline stood at her shoulder with her little white cards. Marissa dropped into a chair and pulled her dressing gown tight. Patricia sat as far from Alex as the table allowed, an ice towel pressed to her face. They had put Preston on the sofa by the fire, still on his stretcher, moaning softly. Gideon stood by the door with his book. Nobody told him to sit.

Alex stood behind Serena's chair. He could smell candle smoke, and under it, cedar on her coat sleeve, carried home from the Halcyon offices.

Serena opened the folder and laid one paper on the table. A gold seal glinted at the bottom.

"This is the Halcyon contract," she said. "Every Halcyon house on the coast. Every hotel, every spa, every room. They'll use our scents. Tiffany scents. For ten years."

Marissa leaned forward so fast her chair creaked. "Ten years? How much?"

"Enough that this house never has to sell another painting."

The Baroness put on her glasses. She read the first page in silence. Then the second. Her finger stopped on the last line.

"Serena Tiffany," she read. "Director. In your own name."

"In my own name," said Serena. "Halcyon wouldn't sign it any other way. Not after Patricia."

Patricia ripped the towel down. "That's my contract! Grandmother gave it to me!" "And Halcyon took it back," said Serena, "after the Seacrest."

"Because of him!"

"Because of you."

Serena didn't raise her voice. She didn't have to.

"Grandmother, I'm going to say this once. I'm tired. I've been signing papers since this morning. And I came home to find my husband standing in the yard like a dog waiting to be put in a box."

"Your husband," said Pauline pleasantly, "lives where the house rules say he lives. He sleeps by the dogs. That was always clear."

"Then it's going to stop being clear."

Serena laid her hand flat on the contract.

"I spent two years locked in the tower," she said. "Since I came out, I've slept in the garage wing by the kennels, on a bed with one leg made of books. I'm not doing it again. Not the tower. Not the kennels. Not the garage. I want a room in this house. Our room. Mine and Alex's."

"Absolutely not," Marissa snapped. "The main house is full! Where would we put Preston?"

"Preston has a room. He has two."

The Baroness's voice dropped. "And if I say no?"

"Then we leave." Serena said it simply, like telling the time. "Tonight. Alex and I. We'll find a flat by the harbour. And the contract comes with me, because it's in my name. Halcyon can buy its scents from Serena Tiffany, who used to live here."

The room went so quiet they could hear Preston breathing through his taped nose. Alex looked down at the back of Serena's head. Her neck was very straight. Her hands were not quite steady on the paper. She was scared. She was doing it anyway. For him.

"You wouldn't dare," Patricia breathed.

"Try me."

Pauline's pen stopped. Marissa's mouth hung open. By the door, Gideon closed his book.

The Baroness took off her glasses and folded them, slowly. For a long moment she only looked at her granddaughter, as if seeing her for the first time in years.

Then she tapped her cane once on the floor.

"The east room," she said. "First floor, above the garden. Felicia will make it up tonight."

"Mother!" said Pauline.

"It's decided." The Baroness did not turn her head. "That's business, Pauline. Ten years of Halcyon is business."

Serena's shoulders dropped a little, as if she had been carrying something very heavy for a very long time and had just been allowed to set it down.

"Thank you, Grandmother. One more thing."

"There's more?"

"One more." Serena turned in her chair and looked around the table, face by face. "From tonight, nobody in this house calls Alex an idiot. Not to his face. Not behind his back. Not as a joke. He's my husband. Call him that, and you're calling me that."

"But he's " Marissa started.

"Not another word, Marissa. Push it, and you're out on the street."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Try me. It's you or me packing a bag tonight, and you know damn well who this family will choose."

Marissa clamped her mouth shut.

For the first time that night, the Baroness looked at Alex. "Is that what you want, boy?"

"I want what Serena wants," said Alex. "It's usually better than what I want."

By the door, Gideon laughed out loud, then coughed and pretended he hadn't.

"Fine," said the Baroness. "Nobody says it. It's decided."

"Fine," Marissa muttered.

"Fine," said Pauline.

Patricia lowered her towel and stared across the table at Alex with her one good eye.

"I'll call him what he is," she said. "An idiot who sat in the Diamond Room and let the Vales break my cousin's hand."

Every head turned to Alex.

He was supposed to look at the floor. He was supposed to mumble something about soup.

He didn't. Serena had just put her own name on the table for him. He would not stand there and let it be laughed at. Not tonight. Not with whoever was watching.

"The Vales barred you from the Grand," Alex said, quite calmly, "because you sat a fake count at Miss Hale's table and let Preston sign for a room he never paid for in front of the owner's people was the only one at that table who was actually invited."

Patricia's good eye went very wide.

"And your eye," Alex added, more gently, "will open in four days if you keep the ice on it. Twenty minutes on, then off. Not all night. You'll give yourself a cold."

Nobody said anything at all.

Serena twisted round to look up at him. For one second her face was the face of someone hearing a song she thought she had forgotten.

"Well," Gideon said softly from the door. "Well, well."

The Baroness rose. "The east room," she said again. "Goodnight."

At the end of the north passage, behind the dining room, Pauline's study was very small and very neat.

She locked the door behind her. Her hands shook as she unlocked the bottom drawer and took out the second phone, the plain black one nobody in the house knew about.

It rang twice before a man answered. He had a capital accent, and he had never once said his name.

"It's late, Mrs. Tiffany."

"Things have changed," said Pauline. "Tonight. Serena, the tenth prince's wife, came home with the Halcyon contract in her own name. Ten years he made Mother give them the east room. She made the whole house promise not to call him an idiot." She took a breath. "She's on top now. And he's her soft spot. He's the way to hurt her."

"I see."

"I need money. A lot of it. Enough to make him suffer properly. Enough to finish them both before she grows any taller."

A pause. Far away, paper moved.

"Mrs. Tiffany," said the man. "Do you know what kind of month His Highness has had?"

"I... no. How would I-"

"A bad month. A very bad month. People are watching him now. People he can't buy." Another pause. "And you call at midnight asking for more money. For a boy who sleeps with dogs."

"He doesn't sleep with dogs any more. That's what I'm telling you. I need more money to put him back with them."

"Two months, Mrs. Tiffany. Two months of funding you. Two months of reports that the boy ate soup, fell down, or talked to the dogs. We have spent a fortune on you, and all we bought was a front-row seat to an idiot being an idiot."

"He's not an idiot-" She stopped.

"Not an idiot? Do you have proof? One clever thing he's done?"

Pauline looked at the box of cards. Two months of them. Not one said anything else. "Nothing," she said.

"Then here is His Highness's answer. The watching is over. The man in the car at your corner goes home tonight. The gardener won't come back. Nobody watches the boy any more. He isn't worth the petrol. He's just an idiot."

"Wait." Pauline's voice cracked for the first time in twenty years. "Please. What about me?"

"Your money stops tonight, Mrs. Tiffany. Good luck with your contract."

The line clicked and went dead.

Pauline sat very still in the little room. The clock ticked, loud as a hammer.

Two months of money. Gone in one call.

She hurled the phone against the wall.

"No," she hissed. "This does not end here."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 839

The next morning, the grey car parked at the corner was gone.

The gardener who raked the gravel path and meticulously logged every movement in his notebook was gone.

For two long months, someone had watched his every breath. Now, the surveillance was completely dark.

For those exact two months, the crown prince, the second prince, and their co-conspirators had fancied themselves geniuses, paying operatives to monitor and harass him.

His counter-strategy? Play the absolute fool.

Give them nothing.

What kind of trouble they can inflict on an idiot who refuses to react the way they want?

Absolutely none. They were merely burning through time and capital while drowning in their own vicious succession war.

After all, Alex wasn't the only target the crown prince had marked. With the second prince and the rest of the royal siblings locked in a brutal mutual destruction pact, they were tearing each other apart.

Compared to the raging dumpster fire of the royal court, Alex's existence was the least of their worries-meaning every pair of hostile eyes had finally looked away from him.

Alex stood alone in the hallway and laughed out loud.

He possessed the profound knowledge of every Xia cultivation art, every Prussian intelligence protocol, and magic—and his current vessel was only just beginning to tap into their true potential.

Fine. Then he would start again from the bottom, one step at a time, and do it properly this time.

That evening, he strolled out along the crumbling stone of the old harbor wall, searching for a dense pocket of heaven and earth spiritual energy where he could cultivate undisturbed.

Here it was thin. Then, at the very end of the wall, it was suddenly thick.

A 500-year-old tree grew there out of a crack in the stones, thick as a barrel. Under it, the air was heavy and still.

"This is it," Alex said.

He sat down cross-legged on the cold stones, his back to the city and his face to the sea.

He took out his phone first. A man who meant to sit still all night had better tell his wife.

"Walking. Back late. Don't wait up," he typed.

The answer came almost at once. "Walking where? It's dark."

"By the sea. I'm thinking."

There was a pause. Then: "Since when do you think?"

"Since this morning. It's very tiring."

"Then come home and sleep. Come home safe."

He smiled at the screen and put the phone face down on the stones.

Then he closed his eyes and thought, very carefully, about how to begin the imperial Xia's cultivation.

He breathed out, and emptied himself, and began.

At first nothing happened.

Then, slowly, the air around the tree began to change.

It moved toward him like water finding a drain, and sank into him all night long. He laid the first stones of a new foundation, the right one this time, and checked each one twice.

He didn't take the energy of the tree. He was cultivating the energy of heaven and earth; the tree only helped him deepen his connection to the earth so he could draw energy from heaven, or the true source of life's creation energy.

As the eastern sky began to pale into a bruised grey, he felt the spiritual energy settle heavily and pool within his dantian.

Alex snapped his eyes open.

He stood up. He had not slept, and he was not tired at all.

He spun around, pulled back his right fist, and unleashed a punch aimed straight at the ancient, 500-year-old trunk. Stopping a full meter short, he let only the compressed shockwave of the blow strike the wood.

The massive tree shuddered violently, unleashing a cascading shower of yellow leaves that fell around him like autumn snow.

The sheer air pressure of an unlanded punch packed that much destructive force. Had that fist connected with a human body, it would have blown straight through them without slowing down.

Alex stared at the falling foliage for a long moment before letting out a quiet sigh. "Is that really it?" he murmured.

"Compared to what I faced back in Xia, this is just a toddler knocking on a door," he told the silent tree. "Back then, true powerhouses could split a tree like you from crown to root with a single flick of a finger, completely unfazed."

He brushed a stray leaf from his hair and gave a wry smile. "Looks like I still have a long road ahead of me."

He walked back along the wall toward the city as the sun came up out of the sea. Halfway along, where the wall met the harbour path, three people were coming toward him in the early light.

A tall girl in white training clothes with a hard ponytail and a cold face. An old man in an old-fashioned grey suit. And a sharp young man whose eyes never stopped moving.

Alex passed them without really seeing them.

But they saw him.

The young man turned his head and watched Alex all the way along the path, until he was out of sight behind the fish market. Then he bent to the old man.

"Sir. That one. Did you see how he walked? Like he was standing still and the ground was moving."

The old man shook his head. "An early walker. A dockhand going home. Don't stare at people."

"He looked straight through us, sir."

"Then he has manners," said the old man. "Walk on."

The girl did not look back at all.

On the quay he ate three plates of fried fish and bread at a stall for the night boats, and was still hungry.

His phone buzzed. It was Felicia, and she sounded close to tears.

"Prince! Where are you? You didn't sleep in your bed! I looked in the garage, I looked by the kennels, I thought somebody had taken you!"

"I'm fine, Felicia. I went for a walk."

"All night?" Felicia cried.

"It was a long walk," Alex said into the receiver. "I'll be home tonight. I promise."

"Living it up in the nightlife, are we, Prince?" a teasing voice chirped. "I hear it's entertaining, but do watch out for sexually transmitted diseases, Young Master."

"I didn't go anywhere."

"Well, I suppose it is about that age for a young prince. Fine. Next time, would you like me to accompany you on your little nocturnal excursions?"

Alex abruptly ended the call.

Serena was waiting in the east room with her arms folded when he came up. "Where have you been? All night and all day! Felicia's been to the window forty times."

"By the sea," said Alex.

"You smell of fish," she said.

"I had fish."

She stared at him. Then she laughed, despite herself, and threw a pillow at him.

"Don't go missing again," she said, climbing into bed. "I've only just got you a window."

At five the next morning, before it was light, he went straight back to the 500 years old tree at the end of the wall.

Somebody was already under it.

It was the girl with the ponytail, going through a meditating form under his tree. The old man in the grey suit stood watching her Up on the harbor road, the sharp young man sat in a black jeep, looking at everything.

Alex stopped and watched.

There was a small trace of power inside the girl. For a second, he wondered if he had found another cultivator like himself.

No. Too weak. Just some ancient family cultivation art that pushed a little breath around toward the dantian, hoping they could somehow gather it.

And she was doing it completely wrong. It was like throwing water into a torn bucket, hoping the bucket would fill.

Things get wet, but it never fills.

No, her cultivation method was thoroughly flawed.

She has genuine talent, but the technique she's practicing is pathetic. Back in Xia, the cultivation arts were supreme; out here, they can't even crack the threshold of the first level of of Foundation, cultivation.

"What a waste," he murmured, shaking his head. "She's throwing her potential away."

Without meaning to, he shook his head.

The girl stopped dead in the middle of a strike. She turned round and looked straight at him, and her face was as cold as the sea.

"What are you staring at?" she snapped. "And what are you shaking your head for?

Do you even know what you're looking at? Do want to get hit?"

Alex flashed a confident smirk. "Tell you what if you can actually me manage to land a single hit on m I'll teach you a cultivation art that's ten times superior to whatever garbage you're practicing."

You're all caught up with The Almighty Dominance.