

Chapter 566 A Storm Of Rumors

Laura and Marina's secret communication with Jefferson was not known to Marco. All he knew was that after that day, the two of them, who used to be troublemakers, surprisingly stayed at home and became unusually obedient.

So, he thought they had learned their lesson and would no longer cause any more trouble.

But just a few days later, the internet exploded with a shocking piece of news that swiftly became the most trending story and continued to spread even more and more.

"Marco, an illegitimate child?!"

This was the most popular exclamation of the moment.

With Marco's level of fame, this trending news didn't even need internet trolls to be spread far and wide. Netizens everywhere voluntarily joined the discussion and it soon became the most talked about topic on the internet.

Most people, when they heard about it for the first time, were highly bewildered.

"What the hell is this?! Did I miss something? Is someone out of their mind spreading rumors?"

But when they looked deeper into the issue and saw a series of seemingly convincing evidence, they couldn't help but get drawn in.

The comments section was filled with insiders providing explosive revelations, thereby making the whole thing appear more and more credible.

"Liza has always favored male heirs, so when Marco was brought to the Bryant family, she forced Laura to acknowledge him as her own son! Poor Laura, she was forced to raise an illegitimate child for decades!"

"Laura has truly gone through a lot. Not only did she raise an illegitimate child belonging to another woman, but that illegitimate child turned out to be so ruthless that he seized Bryant Group from Marina and then turned his back on his supposed family, treating the mother and daughter like dirt!"

"No wonder Marco has been treating the mother and daughter so harshly and constantly siding with Loraine who's an outsider. He's been doing all that because Laura is not his real mother. This new revelation is truly eye-opening!"

Under the guidance of internet trolls, netizens kept venting their anger towards the wicked mistress and the even more wicked illegitimate son, Marco.

All of his previous impartial decisions were twisted and misinterpreted as malicious intentions. All of a sudden, Laura became the poor, hapless woman who had been forced by her mother-in-law to raise an illegitimate child who had now grown up to become her oppressor. Marina, on the other hand, was portrayed as the poor, unfortunate heiress who had been bullied by the illegitimate son of her father.

Netizens sympathized with Laura and Marina, and even justified their previous actions. As more and more new revelations came out, Laura and Marina had their images transformed from oppressors to victims.

"Marina is the heiress of Bryant Group, but Marco is so ruthless that he withholds money for their living expenses, forcing someone like Marina, who's supposed to be a wealthy heiress to wear fake designer jewelry! Meanwhile, he lavishly buys an expensive necklace for other women to whom he's not related! Marco is truly a ruthless capitalist. His heart is as black as it gets!"

This was how Marco was vilified and he quickly became the most trending person alongside the revelation of him being an illegitimate child.

At the same time, Loraine, after dealing with the contract at Universe Group, picked up her phone and also saw the trending topic online.

She quickly clicked on it. But when she read the details, she froze, and her mind began to buzz.

Marco, an illegitimate son?

What the hell was going on?

She couldn't bring herself to believe the claims and accusations she had just read online. Her first instinct was to call Marco immediately, but when she did, she found that his phone had been switched off.

Anxiety gripped her heart and she quickly called Carl. But he turned out to be as distressed as she was.

"Miss Torres, I tried to find Mr. Bryant, but he's not at the company!" he told her.

Lorraine's brows furrowed, and memories began to flood into her mind.

Marco's weird body language whenever he mentioned his family, and his poor state of mind during those times, coupled with the way Laura treated him, were some of the things she remembered. Thinking of these things, she couldn't help but find it all strange and more suspicious than ever.

All along, she had assumed that Laura's attitude towards Marco was due to the fact that she preferred Marina over him. But now, on second thought, it seemed it was for a different reason.

Could this alleged illegitimacy be the real reason?

Marco had deliberately kept this secret from her all along, even leaving her to misunderstand the whole thing and get angry over it. Now that the information was out in the open, she could only imagine how he must be feeling.

Loraine couldn't bear to leave things like this, so she grabbed her car keys and drove straight to the apartment Marco had been staying since he moved out of the Bryant family.

Standing outside the cold, grey-toned apartment, Loraine pressed the doorbell anxiously while continuously calling Marco.

But no matter how hard she knocked, rang the doorbell, and even called his name at the top of her lungs, there was still no response from inside, and his line remained unreachable.

Growing increasingly worried, Loraine decided to get in by herself. She stared at the lock which could only be opened with a password. She hesitated for a moment, and eventually decided to try Marco's birthday.

Instantly, there was a beep, followed by "Incorrect password!"

She bit her lip, contemplating whether or not to type her own

birthday.

Eventually, she did. And surprisingly, the light turned green, and the door was unlocked.

But Loraine didn't dwell long on the surprise. She quickly pushed the door open and stepped in.

Inside, the curtains were drawn tightly, casting a dim and gloomy shadow on the living room. But still, Marco was nowhere to be found.

Loraine called out his name twice, but there was no response. She grew even more anxious, fearing that he might have done something rash. Frantically, she searched through the rooms, but still, there was no sign of him.

Just as she was about to give up, she noticed that a door leading from the bedroom to a small balcony outside was open.

Loraine pushed it open, and immediately, she was hit by a strong smell of alcohol.

Empty bottles of wine were scattered all over the floor, and on a rocking chair nearby lay Marco, his gaze empty and fixed on the distance, his face devoid of any emotion and exuding an aura of desolation and coldness.

Loraine's heart ached and anger flared up within her at the sight of all these. She quickly strode over to snatch the wine bottle from his hand, and threw it to the ground. It shattered with a loud bang, finally catching Marco's attention. He turned to look at her, his face blank.

Immediately, the words of reproach Loraine had wanted to throw at him froze in her throat. Instead, she leaned over, touched his forehead with her hand, and said softly, "Stop drinking. It's not good for your health."

Marco gazed at her for a while before letting out a bitter, self-deprecating chuckle. "You saw the trending story online, didn't you?"

His voice sounded rough and hoarse.

In response, Loraine nodded silently. Whether the news was true or false was irrelevant to her at this moment. All she cared about was the man in front of her.

Marco smiled wryly. "Though I've long been disappointed in the Bryant family, I never imagined that they would ever stoop so low and expose this matter for their own selfish gain," he said bitterly.

Loraine was shocked. "You mean it was someone from the Bryant family that leaked this information? How dare they do such a thing?"



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Chapter 567 Not The Time For This

Now, the Bryant Group relied entirely on Marco for support. Even if he truly was an illegitimate child, the Bryant family had to keep this secret hidden for their own good. How could they take the initiative to expose it?

Loraine couldn't understand the reason of exposing.

Marco let out a bitter laugh. "It's unlike my grandmother to act this way, but Marina and her mother are different. They would go to any lengths to work in their favor."

Loraine silently berated them and gazed upon Marco's drained countenance, her heart aching more intensely.

If not for his concern with his so-called family, Marco, being image-conscious, wouldn't have hidden away in solitude, drowning his sorrows in alcohol.

She offered him solace by gently patting his shoulder, causing Marco's eyes to shimmer. His voice raspy, he confessed, "Loraine, I regret not revealing this to you earlier... I was overly concerned about how you'd perceive me, and I didn't want you to think less of me."

Caught off guard, Loraine took a moment before softly asserting, "Your identity doesn't define you, and it's you as a person that matters to me, not your standing."

Otherwise, she wouldn't have kept her true self hidden and become part of the Bryant family.

On hearing this, a spark lit up Marco's otherwise desolate eyes, and he felt a rush of warmth. Unable to contain himself, he wrapped Loraine in a comforting hug.

Her closeness only fueled his longing for her. Marco allowed himself to be vulnerable before his beloved, closing his eyes to the world around him.

Startled by his sudden action, Loraine did not pull away. Instead, she reciprocated the hug, gently rubbing his back in a soothing manner.

Marco, intoxicated, buried his face in her neck, his rough stubble grazing against her skin.

The strong aroma of alcohol was overpowering, and in that moment, Loraine felt a certain intoxication as well, despite not having consumed any alcohol.

As Marco's breaths turned labored, he inadvertently brushed his lips against the base of her neck, evoking a soft gasp from Loraine.

"Um..."

Her restrained, chilly, and fragmented whisper sparked an ambiguous tension in the air.

As Marco continued to kiss up her neck, Loraine was overtaken by a tremor. However, he persisted, showing no signs of releasing her.

Just as the situation was about to escalate, Loraine stumbled over a wine bottle on the ground, tumbling onto the rocking chair along with Marco.

Snapping back to reality, Loraine swiftly pushed him aside and

hastily straightened her disheveled clothes.

Marco, pulled back into reality, gazed around the chaotic balcony and shook his head. Now was not the appropriate time for this. The timing and location were completely inappropriate.

"I let my desires control me. I'm sorry," he apologized.

Loraine, in an attempt to shift the awkwardness, suggested, "Let me fetch you some water to help sober up."

Marco had been drinking for quite a while, exposed to the cool evening air on the balcony, and she was genuinely worried for him. She assisted him back inside, provided him with water, and arranged for fresh clothing for his shower.

Freshened up, Marco still appeared a bit disheartened, but he managed to regain his customary polished demeanor, looking much more presentable.

Loraine then offered, "Would you like me to assist with dealing with the online gossip?"

Marco had been her support in the past. Now, she wished to reciprocate.

Marco shook his head and softly declined, "That's not necessary. Your empathy is more than enough. Trust me, I won't be easily slandered or pushed around."

Loraine paused momentarily before suggesting, "At least switch on your phone, so people don't worry."

Heeding her advice, Marco switched on his phone. Immediately, a call from Carl came through.

"Mr. Bryant, finally you picked up! Where are you? You..."

Marco cut him off and calmly issued several directives. After writing them down, Carl informed, "Mr. Bryant, we've managed to quash the online rumors, but the board's shareholders are pressing for an early meeting."

With a smirk, Marco realized that the news of his illegitimacy had stirred up some people.

"Then cater to their wishes and arrange the meeting."

If they wanted to confront the issue, then he might as well get it over with.

Loraine, who was nearby, overheard the conversation and couldn't help but worry. "Those shareholders probably won't back off easily. Are you sure you don't want my assistance?"

Looking at her gently, Marco reassured, "Don't worry, I'll manage this issue efficiently, and it won't interfere with our partnership."

"I'm not just concerned about..." Unable to finish her sentence, Loraine merely nodded. "Alright, just remember to take care of yourself and let me know if you need anything."

After ensuring a housekeeping service was on its way to clean the apartment, and seeing him finish a bowl of soup, Loraine finally left for home.

However, she was plagued with worry. Restless, she glanced through her calendar and sent a message to her staff.

"Clear my schedule for the upcoming days. I have other affairs to attend to."

Chapter 568 Disintegration

At the Bryant family's villa, Marina and Laura were browsing online articles, a victorious smile on their faces.

A wave of sentiment had swept through the internet, a swift tide of apologies and sympathies replacing previous criticisms. Now, Marco was the target of the internet's wrath.

This sudden shift in public favor was a first for the mother-daughter duo.

Laura found her confidence in partnering with Jefferson strengthened.

Engrossed in their victorious bubble, they imagined the prosperous times that lay ahead once they reigned over the Bryant Group. Their joy mirrored in their sparkling eyes.

Their celebration, however, was cut short by the abrupt opening of the room's door.

Liza, reminiscent of an enraged lioness, made her presence known, her cane echoing loud against the floor. Her fury filled the room as she barked, "Speak! Which of you useless fools leaked this information?"

Laura promptly concealed her phone, feigning innocence. "Mom, whatever are you referring to? I'm at a loss here."

Liza, shaking with rage, retorted, "Quit your charade! The truth about Marco's lineage is out in the open. You dare to tell me you knew nothing?"

Laura acted surprised. "How on earth did that happen? Mom, I swear on my life, Marina and I had no hand in this. We might be naive, but we can tell right from wrong. How could revealing Marco's true identity serve our interests?"

Despite her skepticism, Liza paused, taking a moment to scrutinize them. She then asked, sounding unsure, "Then who else could have let the cat out of the bag?"

Recalling Jefferson's advice, Laura was quick to answer, "Mom, maybe we aren't the only ones in the know. When Winfred brought Marco home, someone might have discovered what he was doing. Florence from the Cruz family and the Bryant Group's long-time shareholders were all close to Winfred! They may have had insider information and made a wild guess and leaked the news!"

Liza remained skeptical, but when it came to Winfred's affairs, she truly lacked access to much information. Laura's explanation was sensible, and it couldn't be easily dismissed.

Seizing the opportunity, Laura added, "Moreover, ever since Marco started associating with that Loraine, his arrogance has soared! Not just towards Marina and me, his family, but also the company's shareholders. His behavior has sparked discontent among numerous shareholders! It's highly likely that someone couldn't stomach it and deliberately spilled the beans!"

Liza's expression hardened. She knew Laura's manipulative tendencies all too well to blindly accept her words, and her gaze shifted to Marina, notorious for her big mouth.

"Marina, is this true?"

Marina nodded.

Liza scrutinized the mother-daughter pair, her suspicion apparent as she watched them desperately trying to assure her. "You'd better pray you're telling the truth. If I discover you two are involved, don't expect any leniency. I won't hesitate to disown you both!"

Her stern warning and icy resolve sent a chill down their spines. Memories of Liza's ruthless punishments flooded their minds, leaving no doubt about her determination.

Feeling overwhelmed, Marina blurted out, "Why? Grandma, not only do you favor Marco, but why are you so heartless towards mom and me?"

Laura added, "Indeed, Mom. Your harsh words hurt, even though we had no part in this incident."

Liza retorted with a cold chuckle, "It's best for you both if you weren't involved. But, let me make one thing clear. The Bryant Group can survive without anyone, except Marco! Now that the news is out, I have to stand by Marco for the sake of the Bryant Group."

Realizing that the situation had spiraled out of control, Liza knew that trying to suppress it was futile. The most she could do was manage the fallout, ensuring Marco's loyalty to the Bryant family and prevent a split.

Any suspicion from Marco about the family's role in the leak could distance him further, causing significant harm.

When push came to shove, Liza would always choose her grandson.

After a final warning look at the duo, Liza exited the room, her cane aiding her steps.

Left alone, Laura's and Marina's faces paled with a mix of fear and resentment.

Once they were sure Liza was out of earshot, Laura swore under her breath, turning to Marina with renewed resolve. "Marina, I swear, we will seize control of the company, no matter what. I can't bear to endure this old woman's arrogance any longer!"

Tears welled up in Marina's eyes as she nodded in agreement. Laura gritted her teeth and added, "That old hag won't be arrogant for much longer. Brace yourself for the upcoming days. As Jefferson plans a shareholders' meeting to oust Marco, we need to do all we can to knock him off his pedestal!"

Marina looked worried, twisting her fingers. "But... after what happened at the banquet, Marco forbade me from leaving the house. Can I still go?"

Laura scoffed, "Do you think he'll remain on his high horse forever? Don't worry, I've got a plan!"

Chapter 569 Pulling Marco Down

Over several consecutive days, the Bryant Group lingered in an uneasy peace, the sense of impending crisis heavy in the air. The atmosphere suggested that a momentous event was about to unfold.

Despite the subdued online speculations, the company was beginning to simmer with internal unrest.

Finally, the day of the shareholders' meeting for Bryant Group arrived.

Marco, absent since the recent incident, appeared at the company headquarters, donned in an immaculate suit. His air was icy and composed, emanating an aura of refined ruthlessness. He strode confidently towards the conference room, with Carl trailing behind, grave and somber.

The Bryant Group was on the verge of a power shift.

In the conference room, the majority of the shareholders had gathered. Whispers and murmurs filled the room, alliances and divisions hinted at by the seating arrangements. Some merely observed, while others harbored more sinister intentions.

The moment Marco stepped into the room, an eerie silence engulfed the space. Every eye was locked on him, each carrying a unique motive. But no one dared to break the silence or approach him, including the shareholders who had previously attempted to ingratiate themselves with him.

It was apparent that everyone was aware of his contentious status as an illegitimate child.

Without showing any sign of annoyance, Marco ascended the podium and gave a crisp and powerful presentation on Bryant Group 's objectives for the forthcoming quarter, appearing unfazed by the rumors of his disputed legitimacy. Yet restlessness spread among some attendees.

Jefferson, acting like a benevolent elder, smiled and interrupted him, "Mr. Bryant, before proceeding with your report, haven't you missed addressing something?"

Marco paused, returning Jefferson's interjection with a cold stare and a gesture for him to continue.

Though inwardly anxious, Jefferson maintained a poised facade. "The recent online speculations about you have significantly impacted our corporation. Shouldn't you give us an explanation?"

"I don't owe you any explanation regarding my personal affairs, Mr. Foster, do I?" Marco retorted frostily.

Jefferson feigned concern. "If it were some trivial scandal, we shareholders wouldn't pry. But, your legitimacy affects the company's succession. As shareholders, it's only right for us to be apprehensive!"

Despite none daring to openly align with Jefferson, their apprehensions were clear.

Marco's demeanor grew icy.

Just then, there was a knock on the conference room door. A visibly troubled Carl approached Marco, whispering, "Miss Bryant is creating a scene at the reception. We're unable to calm

her down."

Marco shot Jefferson a knowing look, coolly ordering, "Ignore her. If she persists, have the security escort her out."

Understanding who had just arrived, a flustered Jefferson exclaimed, "Ah, is Miss Bryant coming? Mr. Bryant, your sister, the heiress of the Bryant family, is here! How can you not meet her? Are you feeling guilty?"

Marco fixed his icy gaze on Jefferson, fully grasping that Marina and Laura wouldn't dare such antics without a backer.

Feeling exposed, Jefferson froze. Just as he attempted to speak, Marco diverted his gaze, an icy smirk forming. "Then, let her in."

Shortly, Marina entered the conference room, displaying an uncharacteristic audacity in Marco's presence.

She glimpsed at the board members, dreaming of herself on that platform one day, wielding power at her will.

Her fantasy was disrupted by a chilling voice.

"What brings you here?"

Marina instinctively recoiled at the sound of this voice, but quickly gathered herself. "I am the heiress of the Bryant family, and this is a shareholders' meeting for the Bryant Group. Why shouldn't I be here? I have a say in Bryant Group's future, and I intend to voice my opinions!"

Marco frowned. What gave Marina the gall to act so insolently? Did she truly believe that a few trending posts could coerce him into handing over the company to her?

He retorted sternly, "This isn't a place for irrelevant individuals

to cause a commotion."

As Marco's expression hardened, Marina immediately lost her bravery, stepping back in fear.

Jefferson intervened, "Mr. Bryant, I must inquire. The rumors suggest that you're the illegitimate child and Miss Bryant is the rightful heir. Is that accurate?"

Prompted by Jefferson, Marina felt emboldened and nodded eagerly. "Yes, that's correct! I am the rightful heir of the Bryant Group! Marco is the illegitimate one, he's the one who doesn't belong!"

The shareholders were taken aback by Marina's confession. Before, they had merely speculated about the online rumors, choosing to reserve judgment until the fact was clear.

But now, with Marina admitting it in person, could it still be a lie?

If the claims were true, would Marina indeed inherit the Bryant Group?

Chapter 570 Ingratitude

As the shareholders pondered and hesitated, Marco's lips curved up into a knowing smirk. He didn't say a word, leaving Marina with a creeping sense of unease. His gaze was playfully derisive as he met her eyes.

Marco had anticipated this confrontation, yet he had overestimated the cunning of Marina and Laura.

They desired control of the Bryant Group, yet they opted for the most foolish approach by making their claims public.

It was like they were injuring their opponent while inflicting greater self-damage.

If he allowed Marina and Laura to seize the company, it would send the Bryant Group spiraling towards disaster under their command.

Marina's heartbeat quickened, her fears ignited more by Marco's enigmatic stare than Liza's reproofs. His silence was deep and puzzling.

Yet, spurred by Jefferson's encouraging look, Marina found her voice. "Ladies and Gentlemen, as you are aware, when my father passed, the rightful heir to the Bryant Group should have been my mother, Laura Bryant, and subsequently, me. Marco, being born out of wedlock, has no right to our family wealth!"

The room exploded with whispers. Marina tried to shed a few tears, but failed. Instead, she covered her eyes, feigning vulnerability.

"My mother, driven by her compassionate nature, couldn't bear to see him suffer on the streets as a child, so she adopted him. Considering my young age at that time, she allowed him to assist with the business. The Bryant family never mistreated him, sending him overseas for education and giving him the best of everything. And how does he repay us? With ungratefulness, by snatching away our legacy! And now, he dares to belittle my mother and me!"

Among the attendees, the elder shareholders who had seen the Bryant Group's past upheavals, knew of Marco's significant contributions. They wore odd expressions hearing Marina's tale but chose to remain mute.

Marco narrowed his eyes, skeptical of Marina's ability to craft such a story on her own. The combination of a sob story and references to inheritance rights felt orchestrated, as if someone else was pulling the strings and feeding her scripted lines.

Nevertheless, the drama was effectively captivating. As shareholders started to chatter amongst themselves, Marco cleared his throat, immediately silencing the room.

With a composed demeanor, he replied, "Personal matters like one's origins shouldn't be discussed in a corporate setting. However, since you've brought up Laura's tenure, let's recollect the company's development.

After my father, Winfred Bryant, passed away, my grandmother briefly assumed the responsibility of the Bryant Group. Yet, Laura Bryant, staking her claim as the rightful heir, took control and, in that very year, the company's worth nosedived by half, nearly leading us to bankruptcy. She then commenced selling off shares, making preparations to escape with the money. My grandmother had to call me back from my overseas career to rescue the Bryant Group."

In a neutral tone, neither taunting nor bragging, Marco outlined the policies he had instituted to guide the company back to stability after Laura's mismanagement.

Yet, his recollections made Marina's earlier depiction of being "kind-hearted" seem absurd.

Those shareholders unaware of this history were now intrigued, impressed by Marco's revelations. They stopped focusing on Marco's illegitimate status.

After all, if the legitimate heir nearly drove the company to bankruptcy, and Marco, the illegitimate one, brought them profit, what other option did they have? They weren't part of the Bryant family, so why bother with their internal affairs?

The person who could bring profitability should be the rightful CEO of the Bryant Group!

Seeing the crowd's focus shift, Marina grew nervous, shooting a desperate look at Jefferson for assistance.

Clearing his throat, Jefferson put on a benevolent smile. "We all remember the significant contributions Mr. Bryant has made to this company, no need for reminding. However, Mr. Bryant, don't you think your actions have been somewhat overbearing?"

The Bryant Group has passed its growth stage. Now, stability and consolidation are critical. Yet you've been disregarding veteran employees' advice and making impulsive decisions without considering the ramifications. Such reckless behavior could easily cause a downfall! At this point, isn't preservation more important than pursuing unrealistic rapid expansion?"

Jefferson's comments seemed to influence some shareholders, his concern for the company apparent as he delivered his final

verdict.

"Thus, I believe, for the company's longevity, the CEO position should be transferred to Miss Bryant, who possesses a more discerning mindset and a legitimate claim to it."

Just as his words dwindled, applause resounded from the entrance.

Everyone looked to see that the person clapping was none other than Loraine!

"Well said, prioritizing stability over expansion. Marco has made the Bryant Group robust and thriving, and now you want to use his illegitimate birth as an excuse to push him aside? You've portrayed such ingratitude with such charm, it's truly shameless!"



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Chapter 571 The Support Of Loraine

With a sarcastic sweep of her eyes, Loraine noticed Jefferson's flushed face. Unable to retort, he stewed silently in his anger, much to Loraine's amusement.

Her gaze landed on Marco, who was still visibly shocked at her arrival. She tossed him a discreet wink.

Marco didn't anticipate Loraine's intervention. Still, he recognized her intentions were benevolent, stirring a feeling of gratitude within him.

Jolted back to reality, Marina dashed towards Loraine, ranting, "This is the Bryant Group's general shareholders' meeting. What's your business here? You're an outsider!"

Loraine's glance at Marina was akin to regarding a fool.

"Miss Bryant, it's shocking that you barely comprehend the nature of the Bryant Group's business and yet are present here. If that's the case, why can't I?"

"You!"

Flustered, Marina couldn't form a response. Loraine's laughter rang out before she continued, "As the Universe Group's president, our enterprises collaborate closely. Given the Bryant Group's ongoing presidential transition during this shareholders' meeting, it's only logical that I, as a business partner, should witness the proceedings. After all, if an inept individual assumes the presidency of the Bryant Group, I'd need

to reevaluate our partnership. Losing money isn't on my agenda."

This statement wiped the smile off Jefferson's face, replacing it with a stern expression.

"Miss Torres, regardless of how intertwined our businesses may be, this concerns the Bryant Group's internal affairs. You have no say in this matter. I'd kindly request that you take your leave."

With a nod, Loraine pulled out a share subscription agreement from her bag and brandished it at Jefferson. Her voice was laced with a teasing tone, "Apologies, Mr. Foster. On an earlier whim, I acquired a significant number of shares and currently possess 1% of the Bryant Group's shares. As a shareholder, I think I have a say. Are you absolutely certain you want me to depart?"

Jefferson's already ruddy face deepened in color, hinting at a looming hypertension crisis.

Loraine tucked away the agreement, her fleeting smirk replaced by the firm composure of a seasoned CEO.

Her icy gaze scanned the shareholders before pronouncing, "As the CEO of the Universe Group, my willingness to partner with the Bryant Group isn't influenced by its family-centric structure or the question of inheritance. It's due to Marco's leadership. I place my trust in Marco's abilities."

Except for a few founding members like Jefferson, all self-made shareholders erupted in spontaneous applause.

Several younger shareholders, who previously maintained neutrality, expressed their support for Marco outright.

"Miss Torres is spot on. My decision to join the Bryant Group is

based on Mr. Bryant's ability to lead us to greater success. I refuse to be anyone's pawn!"

"In an age where merit is supposed to supersede lineage, how can the 'bloodline theory' persist? Miss Bryant, I have nothing against you personally, but I do have a sincere question. Did you turn into a fool due to past mockery? Are those online ramblings from you? Without any evidence, why are you slandering Mr. Bryant?"

Faced with a barrage of questions, Marina was at a loss for words, unable to mount a defense. At this moment, Marco spoke up. "Marina, this is the Bryant Group's general shareholders' meeting, not the Bryant family's private dinner. You don't hold any company shares, nor have you contributed anything to the company. If anyone here is unqualified to participate, it's you."

After uttering these words, Marco turned his gaze to the shareholders who backed him, speaking with conviction. "The Bryant Group does not promote nepotism. If the company were to be dictated purely by blood ties, wouldn't it become a puppet in the hands of a few? Is there truly room for growth in such an organization?"

Marco's statement resonated with the shareholders, prompting several nods of agreement. His support surged, triggering a dramatic shift in the meeting's dynamics.

At this juncture, Marco cast a glance at Jefferson, now sporting a long face, and asked icily, "Mr. Foster, do you have any objections?"

By objecting, Jefferson would essentially admit to endorsing nepotism.

Gritting his teeth, Jefferson managed a strained smile and joined the applause.

Marina was taken aback by the swift turn of events. Neither she nor Laura had anticipated such a twist.

Overwhelmed, Marina glanced at Jefferson pleadingly, but he avoided her gaze, his features clouded. He even suggested, "Mr. Bryant, I was misled by Marina's nonsense earlier. Given she holds no shares, her presence here is indeed inappropriate. I'll arrange for someone to escort her out."

Jefferson's abrupt change of stance led to a sardonic smile playing on Marco's face as he silently agreed to Jefferson's proposal.

Before she could react, Marina, her eyes wide in disbelief, was led away by two burly security guards.

The meeting proceeded without further disruptions. Loraine, as a shareholder, actively participated in discussions concerning the company's future.

After the meeting ended, all shareholders left, leaving only Loraine and Marco behind.

Observing the situation, Carl tactfully shut the door behind him, providing the duo with some privacy.

Chapter 572 I Only Allow You To Bully Me

In the conference room, Loraine and Marco found themselves sitting opposite each other, enveloped by silence.

After a while, it was Marco who shattered the stillness. He queried, "What brings you here?"

Loraine, displaying no signs of hesitation, responded with quiet confidence, "I... I couldn't rest until I saw you. So I requested Jolie to temporarily grab some stocks, and here I am. Luckily, I came just in time to offer a helping hand."

Marco chuckled and looked at her with admiration, slowly articulating, "You've helped me a lot."

Despite his ability to navigate his own path, Loraine's earlier display of strength had been the catalyst for a rapid change of heart among the profit-driven shareholders.

What really touched him, however, was the sincerity behind Loraine's concern.

Ever since teaming up with the Universe Group, the Bryant Group's stock value had gone through the roof. Obtaining even a minor 1% stake had been an arduous task, yet Loraine had managed to do it in such a short time, all for the sake of helping him.

Feeling that words of appreciation weren't enough, Marco, on the spur of the moment, embraced Loraine.

This embrace was pure, free of hidden intentions. Loraine, taken aback for a second, didn't resist. She heard Marco's voice, soft and close to her ear.

"Loraine, even though I always said I could manage everything by myself... The fact that you were ready to support me and stand up for me... made me happy."

Loraine hesitated briefly, then reciprocated the hug, gently stroking his back and letting a smile play on her lips.

She shared the same feelings.

In the past, every time she geared up to tackle situations solo, Marco would show up out of the blue and share the load, leaving her feeling grateful and ecstatic.

Love, paired with selfless sacrifices, yielded a joy greater than mere taking.

Now that she was aware of Marco's struggles, how could she let him fight alone?

Marco nestled his head in the crook of Loraine's shoulder and had a sudden realization. This was their first peaceful moment together since they got married.

Without any ulterior motives, they found solace in each other's company, forming a pillar of support, just like a real couple.

Past memories intermingled with the present, and he found himself reflecting on their three years of marriage, apologizing with regret, "Now I finally comprehend the torment they put you through. I'm sorry, I was negligent and left you alone to face the Bryant family. I'm deeply sorry."

His voice faded to a whisper. "If only I had grasped your

predicament sooner and offered more comfort and care, our marriage wouldn't have..."

Interrupting him, Loraine said, "Marco, let's not dwell on this. The Bryant family is separate from you. What's done is done."

Marco shook his head, now understanding the ridicule he faced from the Torres family and Cayson previously.

Even though those incidents were in the past, they hadn't vanished, and he couldn't simply brush them aside.

"I acknowledge that my actions caused you pain, all for the sake of my family and others, Loraine. I may try to justify my actions, but it's undeniable that the Bryant family raised me. Often, in appreciation for their care, I felt obligated to defend them."

Loraine grew quiet, remembering the incident where Marco had assured her he would help confront Marina's false allegations, only to later request her to withdraw the complaint.

Did his obligations to his family mean she had to keep making sacrifices?

Breaking free from Marco's embrace, Loraine pursed her lips.

Sensing her shift in mood, Marco felt a pang of anxiety and inquired, "What's wrong?"

"Marco, are you planning to forever be at the mercy of the Bryant family? Yes, they've harmed me before, but now they're not even sparing you. Why continue to show them mercy?"

Marco grasped her meaning, shook his head, and took her hand, with a self-deprecating smirk. "Don't worry, I won't... That time, I stood by my words. That was the last time. Now, I've done all that I could for the Bryant family. From this point forward, I'll

handle matters professionally and stand by my convictions. I won't let anyone have the chance to bully you again!"

The man who a moment ago seemed to be seeking reassurance now looked like a devoted dog, tail wagging, waiting for her approval.

Yet, this same man had moments ago filled the entire conference room with an overpowering presence that left everyone breathless.

This stark contrast triggered laughter in Loraine, and she reached out to pat Marco's head, grinning as she said, "I don't need your protection. I won't let anyone bully me. But you, Mr. Bryant, just ensure you don't get pushed around again."

Gazing at this fierce yet emotionally attached 'big dog', Loraine was genuinely concerned that he might soften his stance on the Bryant family issue again.

Marco let her pat his head, feeling a bit odd, but he didn't protest. He leaned in, their foreheads almost touching, his eyes locked on Loraine.

"No, I'll only allow you to bully me."

The sight of the confident and attractive CEO acting so tender and cute was surprisingly appealing. Coupled with his piercing gaze on her, Loraine shivered involuntarily. She tried to avoid his stare, but he had her cornered in the leather seat, leaving her no escape.

Blushing and flustered, Loraine raised her head to ask, "H-How much longer will you hold me like this?"

Marco, noticing her flushed face, was overtaken by desire and leaned in closer.

Chapter 573 Doris's Concern

The two of them were entwined in the same chair, with Marco holding Loraine close. Their bodies were so near, their breaths intermingling.

Loraine didn't attempt to break away, and she didn't want to.

As she was captured by the intense allure, she found herself closing her eyes.

Suddenly, the sharp ring of a cell phone echoed throughout the meeting room.

Caught off guard, Loraine's face flushed as she quickly pushed Marco away. She retrieved her phone, discovering that it was Jolie who was calling her.

After the phone rang twice with no response, Jolie gave up and sent a text message instead, detailing some business that Loraine needed to address.

Marco looked at her with probing eyes, a hint of grievance visible in his gaze.

Feeling a wave of embarrassment, Loraine cleared her throat and spoke in a formal tone. "I may have agreed to your pursuit, but I'm not officially your girlfriend yet, Mr. Bryant. Please be mindful of the boundaries."

Marco opened his mouth to speak, but Loraine swiftly stood up, holding up her phone as she said, "I still have some pending matters at my company. As everything on your end seems resolved, I'll be leaving now. Goodbye."

With that, she promptly left the meeting room.

Marco, feeling a mixture of amusement and helplessness, watched as Loraine's figure disappeared from sight. He held his gaze until she was completely out of view. Then, he leaned back into her chair, absorbing the warmth and fragrance she had left behind.

His foul mood, brought on by the shareholders and Marina and Laura, was somewhat soothed.

Not long after Loraine's departure, Carl knocked and entered the room.

"Mr. Bryant, there's a message from Solar Company. Miss Hoffman saw the news online and is concerned about you. She wishes to speak to you over the phone."

Marco frowned at the news. Outside of business dealings, he had little desire to interact with Doris. However, rejecting a friend's concern outright would seem rather haughty.

After contemplating for a moment, he agreed to take the call. The moment he answered, Doris's worried voice filled his ears, "Marco, are you alright? Does Solar Company need to step in? I just saw the online news. Do you want me to help smooth things over with the Bryant family?"

Marco rubbed the bridge of his nose, sighing, "No, that's not necessary."

Despite his profound disappointment with Marina and Laura, Liza had shown him kindness, and the fact remained that he was brought up by the Bryant family. He couldn't ignore this.

He had worked tirelessly to build the Bryant Group to its current state. Regardless of his personal feelings, he didn't

want to damage the Bryant family's reputation.

Teaching Marina and Laura a sufficient lesson to ensure they wouldn't cross him again would be enough.

Doris sighed, "You're always like this, appearing cold on the surface but having a soft heart. Well, I won't meddle, but what are your plans now?"

Marco paused for a moment before responding, "We'll see what tricks Marina and Laura have up their sleeves."

Marco was well aware that Marina and Laura lacked the courage and strategic thinking required to orchestrate these maneuvers on their own. Someone else must be pulling the strings from behind.

The Bryant Group's size and influence inevitably attracted attention, and even he couldn't foresee or deflect every issue. There were likely numerous hidden complications at play.

He intended to follow the trail left by Marina and Laura, find evidence of their collusion with the shareholders, and weed out the root of the problem.

"Doris, there's no need for you to concern yourself with this. If I require assistance from Solar Company, I'll let you know."

Still worried, Doris abruptly asked, "Marco, are you sure you don't need any help? With your past revealed and facing widespread criticism, you must be feeling the pressure. If you need me, I'm willing to abandon everything here to keep you company."

If it had been earlier, Marco might have expressed gratitude for Doris's well-meaning offer.

However, having weathered the most difficult and darkest

times with Loraine's comfort, Doris's words now caused him to furrow his brow.

Was this truly concern between friends?

Doris was clearly trying to gauge his reaction in a rather ambiguous manner!

Marco didn't want to give her false hope, and he flatly responded, "Doris, while we're friends, we also have a superior-subordinate relationship. I value your abilities, which is why I trust you. However, I'd appreciate it if you would refrain from prying into my personal life."

Doris was taken aback, her breathing growing heavier. After a moment, she chuckled lightly.

"Why so serious? I'm just expressing concern for my boss. A happy boss leads to a happy me, right?"

Marco remained silent, and a tense silence filled the air. Forcing a laugh, Doris conceded, "Since you're doing fine, I won't intrude."

Across the ocean, Doris ended the call, her red-tipped fingers gripping the phone tightly, her expression somber.

She had always been a patient predator, gradually drawing closer to Marco without any sense of urgency. But recently, she felt a sense of crisis.

The reason was simple: Marco, once a man oblivious to her subtle hints, now was perceptive enough to detect her intentions and firmly reject her advances.

Doris knew this change was due to Loraine.

"Loraine, you certainly have some skill..."

As she uttered the name with a sinister undertone, Doris's face morphed into a wicked grin. In a resentful whisper, she added, "You're already divorced, so why do you continue to entangle yourself with Marco? Well, don't blame me for the steps I'm about to take."

She had to arrange her return to their home country as soon as possible.

Chapter 574 Getting Thrashed

Meanwhile, swiftly removed from the conference room by security, Marina was forcibly put into a vehicle without a chance to voice her disagreement, and taken straight to the Bryant family's residence.

During the whole ride, Marina put up a fierce fight, hurling profanities at Loraine and Marco. Upon reaching the Bryants' house, her hair was unkempt and her makeup smeared, giving her a wild appearance.

However, even at home, Marina's rage didn't subside. She yelled defiantly, "How dare you lay hands on me? Just wait till Marco, that illegitimate child, falls from power. You'll pay for this! Don't think you can intimidate me just because Marco and Loraine support you. Loraine, a woman from humble origins, has ascended to the upper class, a fitting match for Marco, the illegitimate child. They are destined for failure!"

She created a ruckus, shouting, "Can you hear me? Release me!"

The security guards, wearing poker faces, obediently let her go, dropping her onto the floor of the Bryant family's residence hall.

Marina's outcry of pain echoed through the house, drawing the attention of Liza who was upstairs.

Liza descended, leaning on her cane, recognized Marco's men, and was taken aback. Inquisitively, she asked, "What's happened here?"

The security guards relayed the incident of Marina's outburst

at the shareholders' meeting and her consequent expulsion by Marco. With every revelation, Liza's shock grew, turning into a profound rage. She raised her cane, attempting to strike Marina with all her might.

It was clear her intention was to cause serious injury.

Marina's face blanched with terror and, casting aside her dignity, she scrambled away, wailing, "Mother, save me! Grandma is out to kill me!"

Hearing Marina's pleas, Laura swiftly came downstairs, throwing herself protectively in front of Marina and fixing a fierce glare at Liza.

"Mom, Marina is your endearing granddaughter! What has she done to deserve this? Why would you want to beat her so brutally? She's not your child, you may not care, but I do! If you want to hit someone, hit me!"

Regaining her composure, Liza didn't hesitate to strike Laura's back with her cane, then coldly scoffed, "Do you believe I wouldn't dare harm you? The two of you, mother and daughter, plotted together to deceive me! Marina dared to cause a stir at the shareholders' meeting. It's evident to me that you and your daughter orchestrated the rumors about the illegitimate child!"

The cane's strike missed its target partially, half its force hitting Laura's back, and the other half crashing into the coffee table, leaving a dreadful crack.

Laura felt a sharp pain in her back, close to blacking out. She had never expected Liza to actually try to hurt her lethally. Shaking, she turned back and cried out through tears, "Mom, why don't you just finish us off!"

Marina was petrified and dared not move, clinging to Laura in silence.

Laura brushed away her tears and continued to scream, "After all, life under Marco's scrutiny is unbearable. It seems we are doomed. Perhaps it would be better if you simply beat us to death!"

Although Liza was remarkably strong for her age, she was still aging, and her hand trembled after the assault. Hearing Laura's words, she clutched her chest and shook even more. With the aid of a housemaid, she managed not to fall.

It took a moment for Liza to regain her breath. Pointing at the two of them, she scolded, "You ungrateful wretches! I'm utterly disheartened by you both. Alright then. If you can't live within the Bryant family, why don't you go out and beg on the streets!"

Seeing that Liza seemed to mean her words this time, both of them blanched with fear. Marina cried out, "Grandma, I am your granddaughter. You can't be so harsh on me!"

Laura, ignoring her own pain, crawled to Liza's feet and pleaded, "Mother, what I said earlier was out of rage. You can't abandon me and Marina. We are part of the Bryant family, after all!"

Still panting, Liza regarded them coldly, her face devoid of sympathy. Leaning on a housemaid, she turned and departed, her parting words carrying a tone of irritation.

"Face the consequences of your actions. I won't demean myself by pleading with Marco on your behalf. I've stated it before, the Bryant Group is my ultimate concern. If you two cause harm to the company, don't hold me accountable for my ruthlessness!"

After Liza's departure, Laura and Marina were left sprawled on the chilling floor, in a pathetic, helpless state, exchanging glances.

Marina couldn't contain her tears and sobbed, "Mom, this is all your fault! If it weren't for you and Jefferson instigating me to compete for power with Marco, I wouldn't have humiliated myself in front of all those shareholders, and now we're on the brink of eviction by Grandma!"

Laura, amidst her pain, tried to soothe Marina. "Your Grandma is just venting. She won't really cast us out. Don't worry, don't worry..."

Even as she said this, inwardly she seethed at Jefferson. That man made grand claims, but what was the result? They followed his advice, and not only did it end in disaster, but they also got thrashed!

After being consoled for some time, Marina's sorrow somehow deepened. Recalling the recent humiliation, she ranted, "Marco, the bastard, teamed up with Loraine, an intruder, to publicly degrade me at the Bryant Group's shareholders' meeting! And that Jefferson, he's nothing but a charlatan. He was the one who instructed the bodyguards to escort me out!"

Hearing this, Laura's eyes widened, her anger intensified. She said through clenched teeth, "He's going to hear from me!"

Fuming, she pulled out her phone and dialed Jefferson's number.



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Chapter 575 Paternity Test

Anger bubbled within Laura, her numerous attempts to reach Jefferson over the phone were in vain.

Her anxiety was peaking. Why was Jefferson giving her the cold shoulder? Could he possibly be abandoning her now?

She refused to let Jefferson treat her and Marina like dispensable chess pieces after their utility had expired!

Persistently, Laura kept trying. Even when he had disconnected the call a few times, she remained relentless.

At long last, Jefferson responded to her call.

As the phone line opened, he berated her furiously, "Are you out of your mind? How can you be so senseless? Reaching out to me now? What if Marco starts snooping and uncovers me instantly?"

Jefferson was well aware that his behavior in today's meeting had been too ostentatious and had undoubtedly aroused Marco's curiosity.

He was reminded of Marco's chilling stare, which made him feel a cold shudder down his spine.

Even though Marco was much younger, his skills and approach were nothing to scoff at.

If Laura and Marina's rash actions invited Marco's scrutiny on him, and Marco ended up discovering his past misdeeds, his standing in the company could be threatened.

Jefferson had not forgotten the previous director of Universe Group, who had crossed Marco and Loraine, leading to his downfall with numerous scandals surfacing, and was now serving time.

For the past few days, Jefferson had been frantically trying to cover up his past actions, apprehensive about Marco discovering anything.

The failure of the shareholders' meeting made him blame Laura and Marina, attributing their incompetence to the failure of his plan. As Laura kept calling him, Jefferson's patience began to wane, and he dropped his normally composed demeanor, resorting to harsh verbal criticism.

Laura, hearing the tirade, felt her anger ignite. She snapped back, "Jefferson, we did as you instructed! It's your inadequacy that resulted in failure. Not only did your plan fall through, but it also got me and my daughter reprimanded by my mother in law. We might even be ousted from the Bryant family! If anyone deserves to be berated, it's you! You need to step up and ensure that neither of us gets expelled!"

Jefferson retorted with a scoff, "And what about your daughter's incompetency? You are well aware! At present, the shareholders perceive Marina as a troublemaker, dismissing those internet reports as baseless gossip. Not only did it fail to undermine Marco's position, it elevated his popularity! Unless there is concrete proof that Marco is illegitimate, the shareholders won't accept it!"

As he spoke, something seemed to come to his mind, and his tone shifted, adopting a pretence of benevolence. "Mrs. Bryant, I truly wish to assist you, but I'm an outsider. How can I possibly convince your mother-in-law? Given her favoritism towards Marco, unless we find irrefutable evidence to topple Marco, I regret to say that you and your daughter will remain

under his thumb!"

Laura's expression darkened, acknowledging Jefferson's words as the harsh truth. Before she could respond, Jefferson abruptly ended the call.

Laura and Marina shared a look, stuck in a stalemate.

Suddenly, an idea seemed to strike Marina.

"Evidence... Mom, let's perform a paternity test! If we can show that Marco isn't your biological son, it would serve as undeniable evidence of his illegitimacy!"

Laura contemplated for a moment and nodded in agreement, "That seems to be our only course of action at this point."

However, executing a paternity test would mean eluding Liza's notice. If she caught wind of their covert operations, she would undoubtedly expel them from the Bryant family instantly.

"We need to visit the Bryant family's hospital for the paternity test," Laura stated. She felt a pang of embarrassment. "But I have records at that hospital from when I was pregnant with you. I might be recognized, which could jeopardize our plan."

She turned to Marina, her voice filled with surprise, "But you've never been there. If you go, it might lower our chances of being discovered!"

Marina agreed, understanding that it was up to her to undertake this risk.

She assisted Laura to her feet, and they retreated to their room. After Laura briefed Marina about the hospital, she whispered, "The hospital already has my DNA records. You'll need to obtain Marco's and then head to the hospital for the test. Make sure he doesn't find out, and also, keep it from your grandmother."

Marina nodded with determination, feeling a sense of pride in her plan. "This time, Marco is going to face complete humiliation!"

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