

Chapter 814 A Devoted Father

Clifford approached Ariadna's bedside, his eyes tracing the network of tubes entwining her frail body. Longing to grasp her hand, he found it impossible amidst the medical apparatus. He simply gazed at Ariadna, his face etched with worry.

"My beloved Ariadna, you're facing surgery. I had to be here," he murmured.

Lips quivering, Ariadna fought back tears.

She recalled her diagnosis, a time when Clifford was engulfed in work. Her only companion had been her ailing mother, whose eventual passing was steeped in sorrow. Overcome, Ariadna whispered, "If only Mom were still with us."

Clifford averted his gaze. Since his wife's passing, he hadn't remarried, earning acclaim as a devoted husband and father in Zodiac.

Yet, he avoided discussing his late wife, whom he never truly loved. With a forced smile, he deflected, "Your mother is gone. Ariadna, you are my only child and you are my world. I can't lose you."

"Dad, don't worry. Mom will guard me from above. I'm fortunate! I secured the surgery robot and even met my perfect match! The doctor's optimistic about my recovery!"

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"Dad, don't worry. Mom will guard me from above. I'm fortunate! I secured the surgery robot and even met my perfect match! The doctor's optimistic about my recovery!" she exclaimed.

A gentle smile lit up Clifford's face. "That's wonderful. You're the Cruz family's precious princess, blessed by the heavens."

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As they conversed, Ariadna's expression tensed with guilt. "Dad, aren't you swamped with work? Travelling to Vagow to see me must take so much time. I hate to burden you."

Clifford exhaled a sigh of relief. "Silly child, your well-being surpasses all. Money lost can be earned again, but you, my dear, are irreplaceable."

Ariadna blushed, smiling softly. "I know you cherish me. Thanks, Dad."

Perhaps it was her grave illness that shielded her from the family's dark realities. Living in the hospital ward limited her knowledge, keeping her blissfully unaware of the Cruz family's shadows. Her naivety was such that no one would guess she was raised in a powerful household.

Clifford's gaze held layers of complexity. As a father, his heart swelled with pride at his daughter's gentle and pure nature.

Yet, as a member of the Cruz family, he harbored concerns. Her tender disposition seemed ill-suited to carry the significant Cruz family burden.

Despite these thoughts, Clifford held his peace. With only two days remaining until the surgery, his predominant feeling was guilt toward his daughter. His only wish was for Ariadna's recovery, surpassing all other concerns.

Ariadna's eyes suddenly sparkled with excitement. "Dad, guess what? In Vagow, I met an incredible friend. Without my new friend's help, this surgery, even my survival, wouldn't be possible! I owe my friend a huge thank you once I'm better!"

Her enthusiasm was palpable as she spoke of this friend, a sight Clifford hadn't witnessed before. But his heart sank a bit upon hearing it.

He was aware that the surgery hinged on the blood purification stem cells donated by Marco, and that Tillie mentioned Marco's crucial role in securing the robot.

Clifford surmised Ariadna's friend must be Marco. Noticing Ariadna's joyous demeanor, he wondered if she had feelings for Marco.

The thought caused Clifford's expression to darken. Ariadna, having spent much of her life confined to a hospital ward, hadn't had many opportunities to interact with men.

Marco, resembling his elder brother, certainly wasn't lacking in looks or credentials, having led the Bryant Group. Nevertheless, he appeared to be a talented and handsome man.

At Ariadna's age, being drawn to such an impressive figure seemed natural.

But a relationship with Marco was unthinkable. The two of them were...

As Clifford dwelled on the matter, his anxiety intensified. The impossibility of revealing the truth to Ariadna tormented him, especially considering how devastated she would be upon discovering it. Lost in his thoughts, he tuned out Ariadna's subsequent words.

Regaining his focus, he said with an unyielding tone, "You and your new friend? It's out of the question. Ariadna, it's best to get rid of that thought right now!"

Ariadna's expression was one of bewilderment. "What?" she uttered, her eyes widening. She had been sharing Loraine's kindness towards her and her promise of a trip. Yet, out of nowhere, Clifford had dismissed the idea entirely.

What was wrong with the idea of a trip with Loraine? What did Clifford mean?

A wave of confusion washed over her.



Chapter 815

Misunderstanding

Clifford gazed at Ariadna's puzzled face, discerning the familiar vexation of a young girl facing her parents' disapproval. He exhaled deeply, his expression becoming increasingly grave and concerned.

Despite his meticulous planning, Clifford hadn't foreseen Ariadna's affection for Marco. How could he possibly explain this?

Yet, amidst her initial bewilderment, Ariadna experienced a sudden clarity, formulating a likely explanation.

She speculated that Clifford might be hinting at an unbridgeable divide between her, a distinguished member of the Cruz family in Zodiac, and Loraine from Vagow. This gap would render a friendship with Loraine unfeasible.

Ariadna quickly convinced herself that her assumption was correct. Considering the Cruz family's eminent status and pride, even her nanny, Tillie, had cautioned her against befriending Loraine, citing possible hidden agendas.

She pondered if Clifford shared this perspective.

This contemplation made Ariadna furrow her brows, filled with unease.

Though her time with her father was limited, she had always perceived him as a tall, noble, and kind man.

Shouldn't such a father encourage his daughter's friendships? Why then was he mirroring Tillie's disdainful attitude?

Ariadna felt reluctant to confront Clifford, instead gently defending her cherished friend. "Dad, my friend is not like that. That person's truly remarkable and has promised to introduce me to another friend once I recover from my illness. Haven't you always wanted me to lessen your worries in the future? My friend has a successful career, and so does the other female friend!"

She aimed to convey that Loraine wasn't trying to leverage their friendship for social advancement, as Loraine was already established in her career, surrounded by like-minded individuals.

However, Clifford interpreted her words differently.

Had a successful career? That sounded like Marco to him.

And if his memory served him right, the female friend around Marco must be Loraine from Vagow.

Although the Vagow heiress didn't impress him, his surveillance on Marco had made him aware of Loraine's reputation.

In her generation, Loraine had proven her competence. As a young CEO, she had clinched several significant deals, some catching the attention of the Cruz family.

Yet, Clifford's recognition of these accomplishments was far from complete. Despite Loraine's successes, she remained limited to a small section of Vagow, never venturing into the broader Zodiac realm, let alone achieving international fame.

Furthermore, his opinion of Loraine took a downturn when he discovered Marco had been ousted from the Bryant family. Knowing Marco's enamored behavior towards Loraine on the streets, clinging to her like a love-struck youth, only worsened Clifford's view.

What respectable young woman would display such conduct with a man in public?

Amidst these reflections, a sudden realization struck Clifford. Hold on, what was Marco's intention in all this? He seemed to be drawing close to his daughter while simultaneously refusing to release his hold on Loraine. Was he trying to have the best of both worlds?

Clifford couldn't bear the thought of his daughter, a distinguished heir of the Cruz family, sharing a man with another woman.

As he dwelled on these thoughts, his mood darkened. Yet, in Ariadna's presence, he restrained any harsh words.

Knowing her nature, he feared she might be easily misled.

Could it be that Marco had kept his involvement with Loraine hidden from Ariadna, leading a deceptive dual life?

Biting back his anger, Clifford cautiously approached the subject. "Ariadna, as far as I'm aware, your friend already has a partner. Why are you still mingling with that person?"

Ariadna was stunned, thinking that what Clifford was talking about had nothing to do with her words at all.

She sensed something was off but couldn't pinpoint what it

was. After some thought, she replied in confusion, "I'm aware my friend has a partner, but why should that stop us from being friends?"

This response nearly sent Clifford over the edge, his vision clouding with suppressed fury.

Ariadna, with her naive gaze, gently tried to put Clifford at ease. "Dad, I'm mature enough to make my own decisions. I can choose who I want to associate with. Don't worry about me. I trust my own judgment and won't make any mistakes!"

Seeing Ariadna's unsuspecting face, it felt to Clifford as if a banner of realization unfurled in his mind.

Ariadna knew about Marco's relationship. She was aware of his deceitful behavior, and yet she chose to be involved.

She even boldly suggested he not meddle in her friendships!

This was a harder pill to swallow than if Ariadna had been in love with her own brother!

However, with her surgery looming, Clifford didn't want to upset her. He gazed into her eyes, his expression softening, and managed a gentle smile.

"Okay, I'll let these concerns go. Focus on resting and getting ready for your surgery."

Ariadna nodded obediently, her mature response only intensifying Clifford's heartache.

Leaving the hospital room with a kind smile, Clifford's expression turned grave as soon as the door shut behind him.

He immediately contacted his man. "Now, without delay! Find Marco Bryant for me. I need to see him!"



Chapter 816 Clifford's Haughty Demeanor

On the other side, Loraine and Marco found themselves baffled upon discovering that their stalkers were linked to the Cruz family.

What was the reason behind the Cruz family's decision to tail them?

Ultimately, they grudgingly settled on the theory that the Cruz family might be covertly safeguarding them on Ariadna's behalf.

Though it seemed far-fetched, no other explanation made sense. Loraine was convinced that since they had offered Ariadna help, the Cruz family wouldn't dare harm them.

With a sense of relief, Loraine began gathering her belongings, preparing to return to her duties at Universe Group.

Marco, however, was hesitant to part ways. Once Loraine departed, he found himself restless.

Their outing had been more of a shopping spree for him, courtesy of Loraine, who had lavished him with clothes and presents while sparingly treating herself.

Marco was eager to reciprocate with a surprise gift.

He knew that Loraine, a woman of affluence, lacked for nothing. So, a gift from his own effort would truly convey his

earnestness.

With this in mind, Marco set out to select a special gift for her. But shortly after leaving, he sensed he was being followed again.

Aware that these followers were from the Cruz family, he initially disregarded them. However, he soon sensed something amiss.

Protection wouldn't necessitate such stealthy tactics.

With this realization, Marco halted abruptly and demanded in a stern tone, "Enough. Show yourselves."

After moments of tense silence, a car pulled up alongside him. Two bodyguards emerged, addressing him with deference, "Our master requests your presence, Mr. Bryant."

Marco sneered. "No thanks. I've no business with the Cruz family."

Their request struck him as peculiar.

Only Aldo wielded such influence over him. How dare the Cruz family order him like that?

Exchanging glances, the bodyguards grew visibly uneasy. One, left with no choice, disclosed, "Mr. Bryant, it concerns your true identity. We urge you to join us. Aren't you intrigued by your successful match with Miss Cruz?"

So, their true intent was this all along, not secret protection as they had surmised!

Marco said indifferently, "Curiosity and interest are far from

me. Relay to your master that rewards from the Cruz family hold no appeal to me. But more importantly, keep out of my way and don't be a nuisance."

The Cruz family's bodyguards, unaccustomed to such dismissive treatment, exchanged confused glances, unsure of how to proceed.

In the ensuing silence, one finally mustered the courage to speak. "Mr. Byrant, please hold on for a moment. I need to consult with my master."

Marco remained silent.

The bodyguard turned and whispered into the car window. Moments later, the door swung open.

A gentleman stepped out of the car. He was dressed in a sophisticated linen shirt, and his shoes were impeccably clean. His polite smile and attire all indicated his well-educated background.

This man was Clifford. He approached Marco, offering a smile, and remarked, "Young man, you certainly have a fiery temper."

Upon a closer look at Marco, Clifford's expression shifted to one of surprise.

The youth before him stood tall and robust, his handsome features marked by an air of defiance, reminiscent of his brother.

At the sight of Marco in person, Clifford was certain that he was his brother's son.

The resemblance, especially the stern expression, was strikingly similar to that of his older brother in his youth, almost to a unsettling extent.

However, Clifford quickly regained his composure, aware that despite the resemblance, Marco lacked the ruthless edge of his brother.

Marco was merely a frivolous playboy, juggling relationships and content with mediocrity. Regardless of Marco's resemblance to his brother, he posed no danger.

With this in mind, Clifford confidently declared, "Confidence is good, but overconfidence often leads to downfall. Young man, perhaps you're unaware that you might belong to our Cruz family. So, follow my advice. Join me in the car. Don't waste my time."

Marco's brow furrowed. Though he had anticipated their intentions, the confirmation still came as a shock.

What irked him more was Clifford's haughty demeanor.

Therefore, it was out of the question for him to show any respect to Clifford. He replied icily, "I am not, nor do I wish to be, a member of the Cruz family. Keep out of my way. Leave."

