

## Chapter 739 Grand Entrance

The day of the grand Bryant Group banquet had dawned, promising intrigue beneath the shimmering facade of opulence. Within the sprawling venue, bathed in the soft glow of chandeliers, secret agendas thrived.

Once a titan of industry, the Bryant Group spared no expense in orchestrating an extravagant affair.

The vast hall, adorned with elegant decorations, was a hive of activity as Bryant Group employees meticulously put the finishing touches to the event. Among them, Jefferson stood out — a rotund figure expertly ensconced in a perfectly tailored suit. His narrowed eyes revealed a self-satisfied smirk, an aura of unwavering confidence cloaking him.

As the guests began to trickle in, Jefferson observed them intently. His gaze roamed, signaling his assistant to approach. In hushed tones, he inquired, "Is everything set as per my instructions?"

His assistant, wearing a lecherous grin, extracted a concealed bottle of wine, pouring it into Jefferson's tall glass.

"You can rest easy; everything is arranged just as you wished."

Jefferson grinned, displaying a row of yellowed teeth through the glass.

As he peered into the crimson depths, his thoughts strayed to Loraine, resplendent in her vibrant red dress.

His tongue traced his lips, igniting a fervor within him.

All of this, he reasoned, was a result of Loraine's incessant pressure, forcing him down this path.

In his mind, he convinced himself that he was acting in Loraine's best interests. A single, young woman managing the role of CEO would be an arduous feat, he mused. How could she do it without a man by her side?

Coincidentally, both of them were divorced – almost a match made in heaven. While others might underestimate Loraine, he held her in high regard.

Lost in his daydreams, Jefferson was startled to find a faint, graceful figure materializing behind his wine glass – a specter of his lascivious fantasies merging with reality.

With a depraved grin, he reached out his hand, poised to seize his desires. Yet, a sudden cry cut through the haze. "Dad, what are you doing?"

Startled, Jefferson snapped back to reality, hastily placing the wine glass aside. He met the suspicious gaze of his daughter, Bella, clad in a delicate pink dress, her face oozing suspicion.

Clearing his throat, he asked, "What brings you here? Isn't your task to greet the guests at the entrance?"

Bella, her head tilted haughtily, twirled around in her gown, giggling. "Dad, how do you like my outfit today? It's from the latest collection of the season. I've made up my mind to be the most dazzling presence here, ensuring you won't be embarrassed."

Jefferson nodded perfunctorily, his mind once more wandering. If he and Loraine became a couple, Bella would have to call Loraine her stepmother!

Thankfully, he had always encouraged Bella to forge a close relationship with Loraine, ensuring their harmony.

Contentment washed over Jefferson as he began to offer Bella some advice.

"Bella, you know, Loraine will be here today. She's the most talented and beautiful among your generation. You should engage with her, learn from her strengths, and build a strong rapport with her, do you understand?"

Bella's smile faltered momentarily.

Her prior attempts to ingratiate herself with Loraine had been mere facades for the public eye. She didn't genuinely admire Loraine!

Bella clenched her teeth silently. Not only did her father fail to praise her, but he also openly lauded Loraine in her presence. What was so remarkable about Loraine anyway?

Bella remembered how she had fawned over the woman before, only to be met with indifference. She had no intention of humiliating herself by buttering up Loraine again!

Unbeknownst to Jefferson, his well-meaning efforts to prepare Bella for the possibility of accepting a stepmother were backfiring. Instead, they fueled resentment in her heart towards Loraine.

Despite Bella wearing her emotions on her sleeve, her father remained oblivious to her subtle cues. He had failed to notice her carefully chosen attire or her inner thoughts.

At that moment, a commotion at the entrance interrupted them. A quick report from one of his staff members alerted Jefferson. "Sir, Loraine and Marco have arrived!"

As it turned out, while father and daughter had been engrossed in their conversation, guests had started to arrive. Loraine and Marco made their entrance neither too early nor too late, yet they instantly captivated everyone's attention.

Jefferson was caught off guard and rushed towards the entrance. Once he saw them, he couldn't tear his eyes away.

Loraine was adorned in an elegant off-white gown, her demeanor calm and poised. Her long hair was neatly tied at the back, with a wisp of it cascading by her ear, and she wore a subtle, graceful smile on her lips.

The gown accentuated her slender waist, and its layered hem flowed gracefully as she walked. Even without speaking, her refined aura was enough to turn heads.

However, she was pushing a wheelchair.

Seated in it was the man everyone had been buzzing about recently – the former CEO of the Bryant Group, now fallen from grace, Marco.


But the term 'fallen from grace' hardly seemed applicable. Even though he was in a wheelchair, his cold gaze swept over the crowd. He released an aura of dominance that enveloped everyone.

He remained as handsome and mature as ever, his slightly lean face still sharp and chiseled. There was something indescribable and mysterious about him now.

Countless female onlookers felt their chest tighten at the sight of the man, torn between wanting to care for him and feeling that he was out of reach.

Whispers filled the air, and jealous gazes followed the pair as

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they made their grand entrance. All eyes were shifted to these two, immediately making them the center of attention.

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## Chapter 740 Humiliation

As the crowd's initial awe and amazement began to fade, a different sentiment spread among the onlookers – a mixture of astonishment and shock washed over them, and it all revolved around one man: Marco.

Once a driving force behind the mighty Bryant Group, Marco's sudden re-emergence had sent ripples through the social circles. The Bryant Group's rapid downfall had been linked to him, though the specifics of his involvement remained shrouded in mystery.

After the upheaval that had gripped the Bryant family's legacy, Marco had vanished from the public eye, until now, when he had chosen this grand banquet as the stage for his return.

His presence, however, was a stark contrast to his former self – seated in a wheelchair, escorted by Loraine.

Curiosity and whispers floated through the air like a shared secret, begging the questions: What had happened to Marco since he left the Bryant Group? How had he sustained that leg injury?

The crowd's desire for answers was palpable, but out of respect for Loraine, they refrained from bombarding him with questions. Instead, they opted for covert scrutiny, their eyes locked on the enigmatic duo.

Marco appeared blissfully unaware of the attention, his focus reserved solely for Loraine. In those stolen moments when their heads turned toward each other, their expressions softened, radiating a profound connection that seemed to

transcend the curious onlookers.

Their intimacy was a private world in a public space, leaving the audience with a twinge of envy.

Not too far away, a group of ladies, their expressions sour, couldn't contain their frustration. "What's happened to Marco? He's not the same as before. He used to be so prominent, and now he's confined to a wheelchair!"

Despite Marco's impeccably tailored attire and an aura that still demanded attention, his fall from grace as the Bryant Group's CEO had emboldened those around him to speak more freely.

Even when Marco overheard their hushed remarks, he remained unperturbed. Loraine leaned in, her voice a soft reassurance, "Don't mind them. They're just a bunch of low-class clowns who can't stand on your stage."

Marco nodded in agreement, his composure unwavering. He had no desire to engage with those who sought to belittle him.

The group of ladies, now more infuriated, turned to Bella, seeking comfort and solidarity.

Jefferson's recent acquisition of Bryant Group stocks had almost wiped him out financially, but to the outside world, he had emerged as the second-largest shareholder within the Bryant Group. This newfound status had propelled Bella's social standing to new heights.

As the ladies shared their grievances with Bella, she couldn't help but recall her father's words, fueling her anger. She voiced her frustrations, criticizing Marco's arrogance.

Watching Loraine and Marco ahead, Bella's ire flared, and she couldn't contain herself any longer. She declared, "Let's go and

intercept them! Marco has fallen on hard times, and why should he be so arrogant at my family's event?"

In the past, Bella had secretly admired Marco, but he had consistently ignored her, leaving her deeply embarrassed.

Her grudge against Marco far outweighed her feelings toward Loraine, and she saw this as an opportunity to humiliate him.

Her fellow ladies joined in, eagerly rushing forward to block the path of the two individuals.

Loraine regarded the encircling crowd with a cold, unwavering gaze, raising an inquisitive brow as she asked, "What's the meaning of this?"

Bella crossed her arms, her eyes fixed on Marco as she sneered, "Marco, do you still have the nerve to show up here? The Bryant Group practically belongs to my father now. And you? You're nothing more than a wretched vagabond! You used to look down on us, but now the tables have turned!"

The wealthy ladies around her chimed in, their voices filled with mockery. "Should we be grateful that Mr. Bryant didn't choose any of us? We certainly can't handle the embarrassment of having you around!"

Laughter erupted, and one of them directed a comment toward Loraine. "Loraine, are you delighted to have picked up our discarded thing? Only someone like you, from the countryside and inexperienced, would treasure a loser like him!"

Loraine, however, remained unfazed. She chuckled softly, her reply a gentle rebuke. "Is that so? Inexperienced as I am, I'm now the CEO of the Universe Group. I haven't achieved much yet, only ensured my company to be recognized as an advanced enterprise."



Laughter paused immediately, and their expressions turned frigid.

Loraine continued, her tone remaining gentle but carrying a stinging undertone, "Besides, let me remind you that Marco once propelled the Bryant Group to greatness. Since his departure, what has become of the Bryant Group? You may scorn him, but are you capable of achieving the same feats?"

While her words held a soft cadence, her rhetorical question struck the audience like a thunderous slap in the face.

The socialites turned pale, and Bella, her agitation unabated, retorted, "But so what? Even if we achieved nothing, we'd still be better off than Marco in his current state! After all, he's left with nothing now, while we still have our family's businesses!"

Loraine's smile turned icy, ready to respond, when Marco, who had remained silent throughout the exchange, reached for her hand, urging her to hold her words.

Observing this, Loraine decided to stay silent. In the ensuing silence, Marco fixed his unflinching gaze on the group, a sneer forming on his lips. "Your family's businesses?"

## Chapter 741 The Wine

Marco's nonchalant but commanding demeanor was enough to silence the women who, despite their high social standing, found themselves taken aback.

As a man long in a high position, he was still able to command respect even after ceasing to be the CEO of Bryant Group, his dignity felt in every word and gesture.

The group of socialites stood momentarily stupefied, caught off guard by Marco's words. While they were no strangers to high society, they were unprepared for this abrupt confrontation.

With a subtle squint, Marco singled out one of the women, his voice unwavering. "Your family name is Clinton, isn't it? I believe that exquisite necklace adorning your neck was purchased at a Bryant Group auction about a year ago, courtesy of your father."

Marco, never one to pay undue attention to women, had an exceptional memory for business details.

The lady named Clinton paled, her voice trembling. "W-what does that have to do with anything?"

"As far as I'm aware," Marco continued, his tone cold and unforgiving, "due to mismanagement, your family's business has teetered on the brink of bankruptcy for the past couple of months. It's likely that your father is considering selling that necklace to cover his debts. If I were you, I'd be more concerned about my own future."

The young woman stood silent, her face drained of color. Marco's icy expression left no room for doubt.

Without pause, Marco shifted his focus to two other women, pinpointing the weaknesses and management flaws in their families' respective enterprises.

Each woman felt a chill creeping down their spines, their voices faltering.

Bella, now the center of attention, couldn't escape Marco's scrutiny. He chuckled, his words laden with truth, "It's true that your father is set to gain control of the Bryant Group. However, it's currently on the brink of collapse. No matter what underhanded tactics he employs, it's beyond saving."

Bella's lips quivered as she retorted in anger, "You're just spouting nonsense! You're only saying this because my dad kicked you out of the Bryant Group. You're holding a grudge and slandering him! You despicable person! You don't belong at my family's event!"

Loraine, quick to defend Marco, stepped forward, her voice cold. "If I recall correctly, this event was organized by the Bryant Group expressly to invite me. But now, you're trying to force us to leave... Is this the Bryant Group's idea of sincerity?"

Bella hesitated, unable to grasp the intricacies of corporate matters. She wavered but ultimately decided not to engage in such a conversation.

Just as the standoff reached a stalemate, Jefferson received a message that led him to hurry back to the scene. He had momentarily left to prepare for his secret agenda, completely unaware that his daughter was causing a disturbance in his absence.

Upon his return, he scolded Bella sternly, "Bella, who gave you permission to act so recklessly?"

He signaled for his men to escort Bella away.

She resisted, struggling and causing a scene, until Jefferson's patience wore thin. With a silent command, his men applied a bit more force to drag her away.

Once the commotion had settled, Jefferson, masking his annoyance with a polite smile, turned to Loraine. "Miss Torres," he began, his excitement thinly veiled beneath the surface, "I must apologize. My daughter can be quite unruly at times, and I'm sincerely sorry you had to witness this."

He then gestured to a waiter to bring two glasses of wine. He offered one to Loraine, attempting to regain his composure.

"Miss Torres, it's my fault. Allow me to make an apology with a toast."

Without waiting for Loraine's response, he downed his own glass in one go.

While his obsequious demeanor grated on Loraine, she found it difficult to openly reject him. She furrowed her brow and was about to take a sip from her glass, in an effort to expedite his departure.

However, just before her lips touched the glass, a hand grabbed her arm.

Confused, Loraine turned to see Marco subtly shaking his head, urging her not to drink.

He then shot Jefferson a cold gaze. "Mr. Foster," Marco's voice was cool and unsmiling. "How is it that only Loraine has this

wine? I am present here as well. Are you deliberately ignoring my presence? Although I am no longer the CEO of the Bryant Group, I am still Loraine's escort. Is this the extent of your sincerity?"

Jefferson's demeanor shifted, and though he tried to hide it, his resentment for Marco was evident in his eyes. He sent a shadowy glare Marco's way.

Loraine looked at Marco, perplexed by his sudden actions but willing to cooperate. Loraine lowered her head, her gaze landing on the wine glass. She didn't realize that something was amiss, but she sensed that Marco did.

"Jefferson, you invited me here today, but your daughter tried to disrespect me. Now, this happened. What's your intention?" Loraine questioned, playing along with Marco's words.

Jefferson immediately began to sweat profusely, his smile appearing constrained. "Loraine, you're thinking too much on this. It was just my momentary negligence. Bring another glass of wine. I'll make my apology to Mr. Bryant."

He turned to a nearby waiter and urged him to bring some wine forward. However, it was clear for them to hear that he said "Mr. Bryant" through clenched teeth.

Jefferson didn't realize that his plan had been exposed. He only believed that Marco was intentionally causing trouble due to resentment from being ousted from the Bryant Group.

But in the moment he turned away, Marco swiftly took the wine glass from Loraine's hand and poured its contents into a nearby flower vase.

Recognizing this, Loraine immediately understood that something was wrong with the wine.

## Chapter 742 Intoxicated

A surge of anger and disbelief coursed through Loraine when she realized that the wine Jefferson offered her had been drugged.

She knew this was going to be a high-stakes event, but she had underestimated Jefferson's ruthlessness.

Loraine had once been ensnared by Keely's deception, nearly losing her reputation and purity, which had left her with an intense aversion to such underhanded acts.

Her countenance grew cold, and she was on the verge of confronting Jefferson when Marco gently took her hand, restraining her.

There was a hint of indulgence and helplessness in his expression as he passed the empty wine glass back into her hand, silently urging her to cooperate.

Loraine met his gesture with defiance, unwilling to acquiesce.

She had no intention of letting this scoundrel off the hook and was determined to expose Jefferson's true nature to everyone.

Marco's smile deepened, and he shook his head ever so slightly, continuing to hold her hand and tracing her palm with his fingertips. His eyes sparkled with an attempt to please her, trying to convey a hidden message.

Loraine couldn't help but feel a tightening in her throat at this unexpected touch. Suspicion gleamed in her eyes as she whispered, "What are you up to?"

Marco beckoned her closer with a crook of his finger, indicating that he had something important to share.

Nervously, she cast a quick glance at Jefferson, who was still occupied with the waiter, blissfully unaware of their clandestine exchange. Though they were in close proximity, it seemed Marco was about to reveal something confidential.

Without much time to ponder, she leaned in, her eyes never straying from Jefferson.

Unexpectedly, as she bent closer, Marco slipped his arm about her waist, and in a bold, dominant move, he sealed her lips with a kiss.

Loraine froze, her face instantly ablaze with a deep crimson blush, her heart racing in nervous anticipation.

In this public setting, surely someone had witnessed their passionate exchange.

She cared little for the other attendees at the banquet, but the audacity of Marco's public display caught her off guard.

As the seconds ticked by, Loraine's face continued to radiate embarrassment and anger. In a hasty motion, she pushed Marco away, just as Jefferson returned with a glass of wine in hand.

Marco, relinquishing his hold on her, appeared perfectly composed, as if nothing out of the ordinary had transpired. He casually adjusted his collar, seemingly unfazed.

Loraine, on the other hand, scrambled to regain her composure. She wished she could project the words "I did not kiss anyone" on her forehead to clarify the situation.

However, her efforts to appear composed were in vain, and she remained oblivious to the image she projected to others.

For the onlookers, her flushed cheeks, sparkling eyes, and alluring lips might have served as an irresistible temptation.

But Loraine's focus was resolute — her desire for giving Marco a lecture later consumed her thoughts.

The exhilaration of secretly sharing a kiss in public had left her heart pounding. Her gaze oscillated between wanting to glare at Marco and fearing that someone would catch sight of their intimate exchange. In the midst of her internal turmoil, she had even forgotten about the empty wine glass she held.

What Loraine failed to notice, however, was Jefferson's return.

He struggled to suppress his anger as he presented a glass of wine to Marco. He had initially intended to engage Loraine in conversation but was momentarily stupefied by her unusual state.

Then he noticed that Loraine's wine glass was already empty, and his breathing quickened as a primal instinct surged through him — a sense of excitement that momentarily overshadowed his surroundings.

His thoughts fixated on one thing: Loraine had consumed the wine! She had actually drunk from the glass! His devious plan was working perfectly.

Observing the middle-aged man's lecherous gaze upon Loraine, Marco felt a profound sense of disgust welling up inside him. He longed to gouge out those lecherous eyes, but he chose to clear his throat as a subtle reminder.

Jefferson's mind continued to whirl, lost in the most



inappropriate fantasies, until he was abruptly jolted back to reality by Marco's cough. He nearly recoiled in fear, managing to regain a semblance of composure.

"What's wrong with Miss Torres? Is she alright?"

Jefferson decided to act cautiously. Even though Loraine's current state resembled that of someone who was drunk, he sought confirmation from Marco.

With a furrowed brow and a trace of annoyance, Marco asked, "How potent is this wine of yours? Loraine has only had one glass, and she already appears tipsy."

His question was laced with thinly veiled disdain for Jefferson. Yet, Jefferson was overwhelmed with joy – Loraine had indeed consumed the wine!

Suppressing his excitement to maintain a façade of composure, Jefferson poured himself a glass of wine, took a sip, and chuckled. "Miss Torres is my most esteemed guest, after all. Naturally, I would serve her the finest wine. I've been saving this bottle for many years. It's not surprising that she might find it a bit potent."

Jefferson was glad that Loraine was indeed intoxicated. He was fully convinced that his special concoction had accomplished its intended effect.

## Chapter 743 Loraine's Playacting

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Marco pretended to be displeased, emitting a cold humph, but he kept his words to a minimum. In Jefferson's eyes, this was all the confirmation he needed.

Loraine, who had been lost in thought, suddenly realized she was being labeled as someone who appeared tipsy. Pieces of the puzzle fell into place.

The kiss Marco had stolen earlier had been part of a clever plan to make her appear convincingly intoxicated. Their hushed conversation had hinted at the pretense of drunkenness, a ruse to deceive the room.

Casting a sidelong glance at Marco, her eyes shimmered with a mix of shyness and annoyance. She embraced her role with sincerity, giving the appearance of someone genuinely under the influence.

Their eyes briefly locked, a silent understanding passing between them. Marco cleared his throat and flashed her a sly grin.

Loraine, well-versed in their unspoken rapport, played her part brilliantly. She rested a hand on her forehead, emitting a soft groan, taking on the persona of someone utterly overwhelmed by alcohol. Her voice lazily murmured, "This wine is potent, but it's truly exquisite. I find it quite to my liking."

Jefferson's eyes lit up with delight, and he enthusiastically offered his support, saying, "If Miss Torres enjoys it, we can

have it more frequently in the future..."

Loraine skillfully evaded his outstretched hand, feigning weakness, and slumped into her chair. With an innocent gaze, she said, "I believe I might be genuinely tipsy... I may need to excuse myself for a while and retreat to the lounge."

Jefferson was nearly entranced by her glance, now fully convinced that Loraine had indeed consumed the wine and that the drug's effects were taking hold.

His impatience grew as he tried to swallow a lump in his throat, eagerly offering to escort her, saying, "Of course, of course, I'll accompany you."

As Jefferson inched closer, his tobacco-stained teeth visible, Loraine felt a surge of nausea. In her "intoxicated" state, his inappropriate intentions were all too clear.

This aging man, nearing the end of his days, still harbored unwelcome desires for her.

Loraine couldn't hold back a retch, but in her "inebriated" state, it seemed perfectly natural. She managed a smile and replied, "No need, I'll have Marco accompany me..."

Just then, a waiter approached their table, but as he neared Marco, he slipped, causing the tray of red wine to teeter precariously.

Loraine exclaimed, "Marco!"

In a perfectly synchronized act known only to the two of them, Marco swiftly spun the wheelchair aside, avoiding the impending disaster. Consequently, the red wine that should have splattered all over Marco instead drenched Jefferson from head to toe.

Jefferson, not particularly tall, watched in dismay as the red wine cascaded from his carefully slicked hair and drenched his rotund belly before pooling at his feet.

His face darkened instantly, and he resembled a thundercloud.

The horrified waiter stammered out an apology and reached for a handkerchief, eager to assist Jefferson.

However, Jefferson abruptly waved him off, changing his tune as he turned to Loraine with a forced smile. "Miss Torres, I happen to need to get my clothes changed. I'll accompany you to the lounge."

Loraine was on the verge of refusing, her expression icy, but Marco interjected, "Okay, we'll go together. I'll accompany Loraine."

Jefferson's expression darkened slightly. This was supposed to be his moment alone with Loraine. What right did Marco have to interfere?

However, after a moment's consideration, he realized that if he refused too vehemently, it might raise suspicions. Moreover, the thought of having Marco watch as he enjoyed the company of the woman he coveted brought a sinister grin to his face.

With this wicked notion in mind, Jefferson wore a deceptively amiable expression and said, "That's great. Since Miss Torres is a bit tipsy, I can help push Mr. Bryant's wheelchair as well."

On the way to the lounge, Loraine threw herself into her role with even greater enthusiasm. She swayed and stumbled, her brows furrowing as she emitted soft whimpers along the way. Marco watched, both amused and intrigued.

Jefferson, on the other hand, was growing increasingly

impatient. He made several attempts to assist her, only to receive painful foot stamps from the "intoxicated" woman. He even endured a few slaps on his face.

Loraine's innocent facade remained unshaken, and Jefferson dared not retaliate. He clenched his teeth, vowing to exact revenge later.

Finally, they reached the entrance of the lounge, and Jefferson let out a sigh of relief. He had grown weary of the charade and was eager to end the act. He wore a false smile and said, "Mr. Bryant, your wheelchair makes things inconvenient. Let me take care of Miss Torres. I'll carry her into the lounge, and you can wait outside."

Loraine, pretending to sway and lean against the wheelchair as if she were on the brink of unconsciousness, raised her delicate face, appearing utterly helpless. Jefferson couldn't resist any longer and, without waiting for their response, eagerly reached out to pick her up.

But as he bent down to grasp her, a sharp pain coursed through his neck. Before he could react, he toppled over, unconscious.

With a blank expression, Marco withdrew his hand and shook it in disgust, as if flicking away filth.

The once-wobbling, inebriated Loraine now looked at him with clear, sparkling eyes, a blend of excitement and curiosity.

Marco chuckled, affectionately ruffling her hair. Deep inside, he felt fortunate to be the only one who had witnessed this playful and endearing side of Loraine.

Loraine glanced at the unconscious Jefferson sprawled on the floor, her disgust evident. "This old man, nearly the same age as my grandfather, still harbored indecent thoughts about me! What a preposterous fantasy!"

She then turned to Marco, her curiosity piqued. "How did you know he was planning to drug me?"

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