

Chapter 658 Ending The Banquet

Upon listening to Loraine's argument, the villagers considered her rationale sound and directed their questioning looks at Judie.

"Judie," one villager said, his voice filled with earnest confusion, "Loraine is right. Our village has plenty of empty land. Why focus on the orphanage? Even if the conditions there are great, it doesn't seem worth the trouble."

Another chimed in, growing more heated, "And if we're waiting for the orphanage to be torn down for a building, who knows the wait? You talk about earning money for road repairs, but what about those who need money now, whose children need schooling? They can't wait!"

The sentiment in the room began to sway towards Loraine, and admiration for her began to bubble up. "Loraine's really come into her own," someone praised, "She talks like a top executive, smooth and impressive! And she understands gratitude. That's rare!"

"I stand with Loraine," another declared. "By her plan, we lose nothing and gain fixed roads. What's there to debate?"

As the voices of praise and support for Loraine swelled, Judie's control frayed. Her disdain for these "simple villagers" broke through, and her anger erupted. "You ungrateful bunch! This feast is on the Cooper family, and you betray us for this capricious woman? You eat our food and then turn on us? Leave!"



Lorraine's eyes dimmed at Judie's outburst, piecing together the true intent of the gathering.

If she and Marco had not attended, Judie might have used the feast to force Eloise's hand over the orphanage.

Such malice!

The villagers' faces flushed at Judie's tirade, and their voices dropped to indignant whispers. "Judie has lost all reason. Wasn't this her invitation?"

"And we brought her gifts! How come she berates us for freeloading?"

"I gave her my best eggs! What's wrong with enjoying the meal?"

Though their anger simmered, the Cooper family's standing kept their voices low and complaints private. Still, their eyes wandered to the half-finished dishes on the table, reluctance mingling with indignation.

Lorraine rose, her voice strong and sure. "If the Coopers want us gone, we'll go. I'll host a meal at the county's best restaurant. No gifts required. All are welcome; we'll feast as we please!"

The crowd's response was immediate and joyous. Disbelief gave way to anticipation, and without a second thought, they stood, ready to depart.

For these villagers, the county's top restaurant was a rare luxury, reserved for grand occasions. Now, a lavish meal without the burden of gifts? Who would decline?

Judie's face twisted, rage rendering her speechless. Her eyes blazed, but words, for once, failed her.

Lorraine looked at Judie, her smile a mixture of amusement and





defiance, and remarked, "The Cooper family does indeed know how to wield power and show generosity. You invite us to dine and just as readily send us away. But the guests didn't come empty-handed. The gifts at the entrance are ours. Since we are being dismissed, don't forget to collect our gifts. It would be a real tragedy to endure humiliation and lose our offerings in the process!"

The villagers, who had paused at the door, recognized the truth in Loraine's words. They hurriedly gathered the gifts they had brought and departed.

Chaos ensued in the Cooper family's banquet hall, leaving only the remnants of what was once a grand feast. Judie found herself alone in the center, boiling with anger and frustration. She stamped her feet, eyes fixed on the departing guests, fury building to a point where she seemed poised to lunge at Loraine.

Because of Loraine, her reputation had crumbled before the villagers. Who among them would respect her now?

Before Judie could confront Loraine, Marco stepped forward, his eyes fixed on Judie with a warning. He shielded Loraine, and they turned to leave.

Judie's rage found a new target and she immediately gave an order to her bodyguards. "Arrest them! If you fail, you won't see a dime of your pay this month!"

The courtyard was filled with bodyguards who had clashed with Marco before. Their previous defeat lingered in their memories, and none dared move.

Marco's sneer was laden with contempt. "Cross Loraine again," he warned, his voice ice-cold, "and I won't be lenient."

Judie's anger gave way to fear, her body stiffening as Marco



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+120 Points at most

and Loraine passed unhindered, her bodyguards equally frozen.

After their departure, Judie's composure shattered. She screamed in frustration, her bodyguards slinking away to avoid blame, leaving her alone in her fury.

She raged, tears of anger streaming down her face. Everything had been so carefully planned; how had it come to this?

Then, a woman's voice broke through her turmoil, soft yet filled with authority. "My darling Judie, what has happened? Who ruined your banquet and made you cry? Tell me, and Mommy will make it right."



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Chapter 659 Forced Entry

As the woman's voice reached her, Judie felt increasingly wronged and let out a shout, "Mom!"

A middle-aged woman was standing in front of Judie. She wore a dress adorned with floral patterns, looked to be in her forties, and seemed well-preserved, radiating a youthful aura. Her makeup was applied heavily, causing her to resemble an identical version of Judie.

This woman was none other than Zaria Cooper, Judie's mother.

She projected an artificial air of sophistication, which seemed mismatched due to a lack of background or experience to support it. Currently, her feigned grace appeared awkward and unattractive as she approached Judie, her face displaying fury.

"My darling, as soon as I heard the party turned sour, I rushed over. What happened? Why are your eyes brimming with tears? Who dared to upset you?"

Zaria's face contorted with anger as she noticed tear-streaks on Judie's face, which accentuated the hidden wrinkles beneath her makeup. Her countenance turned menacing, and deep lines appeared around her nose and mouth.

Choking back tears and adding a touch of melodrama, Judie stammered, "It's all because of that horrible woman from the orphanage! She actually procured a patron without my knowledge. This man, apparently a hotshot in the finance world, scared me with his relentless and fierce demeanor... They all deserve to perish!"

In Judie's subconscious, Eloise, Loraine, and Marco were all linked. Although she had originally harbored a small amount of admiration for Marco, the memory of his intimidating threat had now completely overtaken her mind.

She failed to mention to Zaria that Loraine had returned with Marco.

Zaria interpreted this as Eloise's attempt to belittle Judie. Her face darkened instantly.

"That old woman dared to humiliate you while I was away? Does she consider you an easy target, huh? Judie, I'll make sure justice is served on your behalf!"

Desperate for someone to reprimand the insolent Loraine and Marco, Judie nodded eagerly. "Mom, you have to help me teach them a lesson!"

Meanwhile, Loraine and Marco were at the village entrance, organizing things for the villagers. Loraine had pledged to treat everyone to a meal, and she fulfilled her promise by arranging buses from a nearby hotel to pick them up. However, they decided not to join them.

Eloise, being occupied with hosting the villagers, also left for the banquet. Oblivious to the fact that Zaria and her group were speeding towards the orphanage, Loraine and Marco walked back together, immersed in casual conversation.

As Eloise was away at the banquet, the children had no classes and stayed quietly in their rooms, either engrossed in television or books. The playground was empty, and the main gate of the orphanage was locked tightly.

A look of disdain and scorn took over Zaria's face as she eyed the gate. She commanded, with a cold huff, "Break the gate



open for me!"

Unlike Judie's orders, her words held more weight. The bodyguards didn't dare to resist. Picking up hammers and stones, they managed to smash the lock on the gate in no time.

With a kick, Zaria forced the iron gate open, striding into the courtyard. Her voice, sharp and penetrating, echoed, "You old hag, how dare you let someone humiliate my daughter? Where are you cowering? Don't assume you can escape me. Show yourself!"

Despite Judie's past harassment of the children from the orphanage, she had never been audacious enough to barge in, let alone resort to brute force to gain entry. The children were unfamiliar with such an incident. They sought refuge behind the windows, a mix of fear and helplessness creeping in. Some of them even began to cry.

Repeatedly calling out without any response from Eloise, Zaria grumbled and made an attempt to enter the building. It was then that a stern, icy voice sounded from behind, "Who are you? Why are you here?"

Marco and Loraine, who were midway back, discerned the disturbance at the orphanage and rushed back, sensing trouble.

Upon arrival, they were confronted with the scene. Marco's gaze turned icy at the sight of Judie, his countenance instantly darkening.

Fear made Judie quiver as she instinctively retreated behind Zaria. She managed to whimper, looking miserable. "Mom, it's him! He's the one who humiliated me!"

Zaria glanced at Marco with a slight surprise.

She considered herself to possess exceptional perception in

this limited area, and quickly noticed the unique aura the man in front of her radiated.

In contrast to her practiced elegance, this man's lofty and haughty demeanor seemed innate and confident.

Such a man was either born into wealth and influence, enjoying reverence from birth, or he had long been in a position of power, accustomed to commanding and being obeyed.

Or could it be both?

Zaria's mind whirled as she remembered Judie's reference to this man's formidable abilities, which caused her to be slightly cautious.

However, given that she had come to cause a stir at the orphanage, backing down now was not an option. Withdrawal would only invite mockery, and how could her family, the Cooper family, continue to command respect in the village if they showed weakness?

As Zaria's gaze landed on her accompanying crowd, she felt somewhat relieved. Regardless of how formidable this man was, he couldn't stand up against a united front. She had deliberately brought extra people with her, prepared for a war of attrition.

Feeling more resolute, Zaria glared at Marco, her tone filled with disdain and mockery. "Young man, don't be naive. You may be powerful in the city, but this is the countryside. I don't care about your background, your wealth, or your influence. Here, it's our Cooper family who's in charge!"



Chapter 660 Fight At The Orphanage

As Zaria's haughty words hung in the air, Marco's eyes snapped up, his expression glacial and detached, as though looking at something beneath his notice.

His look seemed to indicate that if Zaria really thought she could intimidate him, she should give it her best shot.

A chill ran down Zaria's spine as she suddenly understood the sensation Judie had described: being stared at by a venomous snake.

The Cooper family might have gained some wealth and status in their small village, but they were much inferior to powerful folks in city. A dreadful realization crept over Zaria that they were ill-equipped to take on the man standing before them.

But she had already lashed out, and there was no backing down now, especially in the presence of her daughter and subordinates. To do so would damage her reputation and undermine her future influence.

Pausing only briefly to collect herself, Zaria retreated behind her bodyguards, feigning indifference to Marco's formidable demeanor. In a commanding voice, she ordered, "Get them!"

Her bodyguards arrayed themselves protectively in front of her, offering some comfort, but the rumors of this young man's remarkable abilities lingered in her mind. Acting quickly, Zaria pasted on a false smile and attempted to negotiate.



"Your name is Marco, isn't it? Marco, consider yourself warned. Don't let youthful impulsiveness guide you. I'll hold you accountable for harassing my daughter, but if you kneel and apologize to her, I might show mercy. At least, I won't resort to violence."

The bodyguards circled around, clearly apprehensive from their prior encounter with Marco. Though they presented an imposing front, their confidence in defeating him was shaky.

Marco surveyed the muscled men before him, visibly amused by their efforts to intimidate him.

"Apologize? You've misunderstood. It's your daughter who owes an apology to the orphanage!" he shot back.

Zaria's face twisted with rage at his retort, her teeth grinding together. The people who had come with Eloise proved to be just as unyielding.

"Marco, don't mistake my caution for fear! Let me remind you, this village is under my family's control, not the city's. Your wealth means nothing here. Even if you were buried, no one would notice!"

She continued, feigning composure, "I'm a reasonable woman. Apologize to my daughter and sever ties with the orphanage. Then the Cooper family will leave you alone. We could even become friends..."

With that, Zaria cast a flirtatious glance at Marco, making no attempt to hide her intention to charm him.

Her efforts, however, only succeeded in eliciting disgust from Marco. His lips twisted into a sneer as he responded, "You think too highly of yourself. Do you really believe you're worthy of my friendship? In this tiny village, you and your family strut around



like petty tyrants. But to me, the Cooper family is merely a collection of small-minded, grasping fools. Frankly, this conversation is beneath me."

Marco stared at the group of bodyguards with an indifferent glance. His posture signaled his impatience with them.

Zaria's face turned livid, her fury boiling over as she snapped, "Enough! Anyone connected to that orphanage is shameless. Since you insist on this arrogance, don't blame me for what comes next!"

Although Zaria had been privy to countless tales of Marco's prowess and obstinate nature, she had never personally witnessed his abilities. Additionally, she considered the possibility that her bodyguards were simply unwilling to exert their full force. To her eyes, this "pretty boy" did not seem capable of putting up a fight.

With this thought in mind, Zaria let out a disdainful snort and declared, "I'll give you one last piece of advice. You have the chance to back down now. In the orphanage, you're surrounded by mere children. You have no allies here. My men can easily crush you as though you were nothing more than an ant."

Marco's response was a light chuckle, his tone casual and unfazed. "Go ahead, try if you like. Bring as many as you want; I'm not concerned. This group of... trash."

The bodyguards bristled at his words, expressions twisting into anger. Zaria, inflamed by fury, shouted, "Beat him to death!"

Emboldened by Zaria's encouragement and their own wounded pride, the bodyguards held nothing back. They roared as they charged at Marco, each one intent on harming or even killing him.

Their tactics were wild and uncoordinated, akin to street thugs



in a brawl. Marco, though surrounded, remained calm. He moved with grace, effortlessly disabling one opponent after another. His limbs struck with deadly accuracy and efficiency, felling his would-be attackers with ease.

As she watched the scene unfold, Zaria's hands clenched into fists, her anxiety mounting. She waved at her remaining bodyguards, urging them on, "What are you all standing around for? Attack him together!"

A sudden cold, commanding voice rang out from behind, "What are you doing? Stop it right now!"

Zaria spun around, only to find a young woman standing behind Marco. Her pupils constricted, her face paled, and her phone slipped from her grasp to the ground.

"It's... it's you?"

Loraine looked at her quizzically, recognizing her as Judie's mother. But why was she reacting in this way?

Marco had sprinted back to the orphanage when he heard the commotion. Since Loraine wore heels and could not walk fast, she was one step behind him. Upon her arrival, she discovered that Marco was outnumbered by the group of bodyguards, prompting her to immediately intervene and halt the fight.

Zaria, looking somehow guilty, quickly ordered the bodyguards to retreat. Her eyes remained fixed on Loraine, filled with a mix of bewilderment and terror.

Loraine's brow furrowed in confusion.

It was Judie who broke the silence, her voice a screech, "Loraine, are you trying to ruin things for me again?" Then she turned to the bodyguards and shouted in indignation, "You useless fools, I told you not to stop until you finished them all. Beat this



woman too!"

Lorraine's face twisted into an expression of contempt as she addressed Judie, "Judie, you again? First, you tried to get the orphanage from Mrs. Harvey at the banquet. Now that you've failed, you're trying to tear down the orphanage by force, huh?" Her voice was filled with disdain, making her opinion of Judie's actions clear.



Chapter 661 Strange Expression

Judie was so consumed with fury that she failed to notice Zaria's unusual reaction. Her eyes blazed as she glared at Loraine, an internal urge to stomp her feet in frustration building within her.

How was it that she still couldn't defeat Marco, even after bringing more people this time?

Having ruled over the village with an iron fist, she found her current situation utterly humiliating.

The cause of her defeat was clear: Loraine. From their shared childhood to the present, Loraine had been the only one who dared challenge her.

Recent grudges and lingering resentment combined, turning Judie's eyes a fiery red with anger.

Loraine, noticing that Marco was firmly in control and not at all resembling a victim, felt a brief sense of relief. She didn't have time to ponder Zaria's strange behavior, instead she taunted Judie, "Although your family aspires to be the ruler of this little village, it seems the villagers don't quite see you that way, huh?"

Judie's expression twisted into something grotesque. The events at the banquet had proven that the villagers' loyalty lay only in their own self-interest.

Loraine had enticed them with a compelling proposition, and



they had instantly turned on her. If she dared to oppose Loraine now, they would treat her as badly as they had treated Loraine before.

Despite this, Judie refused to yield to Loraine. She lifted her chin defiantly and sneered, "So what if you've convinced the villagers? Is my family supposed to fear them? Hmph, they are but narrow-minded fools! Only those fools would heed your words. What's the point of setting up charity markets? It's simply beneath us!"

Loraine laughed coldly, "You speak of class, yet you've never even been to the city. How dare you claim your agritainment resort is better than charity markets?"

Judie's anger flared, but she suppressed it, replacing her scowl with a sweet smile. "Who said I was going to build an agritainment resort? The truth is, I'm planning a private vacation villa here!"

With undisguised disdain, Judie examined Loraine from head to toe, dismissively retorting, "Ever seen a villa? I doubt it. But then again, the man supporting you must not care for you much, or he'd have returned with you... Don't think I'll cower just because you've brought someone who's been in the newspapers. This land is my family's territory! If you value your life, take your lover and leave. Don't obstruct me from demolishing the orphanage!"

Loraine sighed, recognizing that some people were simply beyond reason.

Choosing not to stoop to Judie's level, she approached her calmly, halting two steps away, her smile faint yet determined.

"What are you doing?"

Judie's question was answered when Loraine's hand shot up,

slapping her sharply twice.

The sound rang out, leaving Judie reeling in shock, disbelief etched across her features.

Loraine's chuckle was devoid of humor. "I'm giving you a lesson in manners today, lest you're beaten senseless in the future. If your mouth only spews filth, it's wise to close it now and spare the earth your pollution."

Judie's mouth hung open as she covered her face, her eyes wide with terror as she looked up at Loraine, her lips quivering. After a moment, she let out an earsplitting scream, "You, you dare to hit me!"

Loraine calmly nodded, her eyes filled with a hint of disdain as she flicked her hand, dispersing Judie's makeup powder from her palm.

Judie trembled, tears flowing as she spun around, stomping her feet and throwing a tantrum. "Mom, this bitch hit me! How dare she! You have to teach her a lesson! If she's not punished today, I won't live!"

Finally, Zaria reacted. She cast a sneaky glance at Loraine, and then quickly averted her eyes, her lips pale and her eyes unfocused.

For a moment, it seemed as though she was looking at someone beyond Loraine.

Loraine recognized that haunted look and suddenly remembered seeing Zaria from outside the orphanage's fence when she was young.

It might have been Zaria's visit to her that fueled Judie's intense animosity toward her.

The expression on Zaria's face now mirrored the one she had worn back then—struggling, fearful, and uneasy.

Lorraine squinted, not fully understanding the underlying reason, but aware that the Cooper family always doted on Judie. Zaria likely wouldn't show mercy, and if things escalated, Lorraine was prepared to stand her ground.

However, Zaria looked up at her, her voice trembling as she stammered, "You are Lorraine..."

Lorraine was taken aback. Had Zaria only just recognized her?

Zaria seemed startled, stumbling backward and faltering as she asked, "Why did you come back? Did you know something?"

Lorraine furrowed her brows, sensing something was wrong but unable to put her finger on it. She replied coldly, "What should I know?"

Zaria accidentally stepped on a stone, almost tripping, but the shock seemed to clear her mind a little.

She reassured herself while studying Lorraine's face.

Although it bore some resemblance to the woman she recalled, that person had a gentle and reserved demeanor. In contrast, Lorraine now exuded a cold and sharp aura.

Lorraine couldn't possibly know her secret, Zaria told herself, so there was no reason to be frightened.


With that in mind, Zaria stepped back. Finally, she grabbed Judie's arm and turned to flee, ordering the guards to protect them.

Judie was left dumbfounded, unable to comprehend what had just occurred. Before she could question anything, Zaria had

pulled her away, her distant cursing growing fainter.

The sudden turn of events caught everyone off guard. The guards exchanged puzzled looks and hurriedly followed. Marco's brow furrowed as he asked in a deep voice, "What does all this mean?"



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Chapter 662 Her Past

Loraine struggled to put the pieces together, but she sensed that she was on the brink of uncovering something she had been seeking for a long time.

Noticing her distress, Marco approached and gently took her hand, trying to comfort her. "The Cooper family is indeed problematic. Should I teach them a lesson?" he asked, his eyes narrowing to cold, dark slits as he genuinely considered taking action.

Although the Cooper family held influence in the village, outside its borders, they were merely ordinary people with some wealth. Marco knew he wouldn't need to exert much effort to deal with them.

Loraine's attention snapped back to the present, and she refuted his proposal, her brow furrowing in concern. "Let's not act hastily against the Cooper family. Did you notice Judie's mother's reaction? Wasn't it strange?"

It was as though Zaria had something to hide and feared facing her own guilt.

Marco's brow mirrored Loraine's as he nodded in agreement. "You knew her before?" he asked.

Loraine shook her head, her teeth lightly grazing her lower lip as she delved into her memories.

"When I was a child, I met Judie before I attended elementary school," she began.



Her recollections were somewhat hazy, but the general picture was starting to form.

"I didn't know who Judie was then, but I would often see her mother, standing outside the orphanage's iron gate, watching me intently for days on end. Later, Judie began to bully me, perhaps thinking I was stealing her mother's attention."

Thinking back, Loraine found the fact of a grown woman secretly watching a child at an orphanage deeply unsettling.

"Did she ever speak to you when she watched you outside the orphanage?" Marco pondered.

Loraine shook her head, frustrated at her younger self's lack of awareness. "I assumed she was there for Judie. Whenever Judie was reprimanded for trying to get others to beat me up, her mother would arrive to take her away."

The memory stirred in Loraine a fleeting pang of envy for children with parents to shield them from their mistakes.

Marco reached out to gently touch her hair, affectionately ruffling it, and for a moment, Loraine's mind drifted.

She no longer needed to envy others. Now she had family who would stand by her, and a loved one.

Suddenly, Marco's hand paused, and his eyes lit up with realization. "Could it be that your being placed in the orphanage has something to do with her?" he asked.

Loraine hesitated, then admitted, "It's not impossible."

According to her family, her parents' car accident had occurred not far from the village, near a cliff.

A previously elusive connection in Loraine's mind began to

solidify.

Her family had often remarked that as she grew older, she looked more and more like her mother. Could it be that Zaria had seen her mother before, possibly even known about the accident, and mistaken Loraine for her?

If so, Zaria's bewildered expression earlier would make perfect sense.

Marco observed Loraine's furrowed brows and downcast eyes, noticing that she was lost in thought and failing to respond for some time. A pang of regret washed over him for having broached a subject that clearly pained her.

When she had entered the orphanage, it was right around the time of her parents' accident. By suddenly bringing up this incident, he had inadvertently caused Loraine to recall her deceased parents and a childhood filled with challenges.

Despite the care she had received from Eloise, Loraine's time in the orphanage had been anything but easy. She had been bullied by Judie and covertly observed by someone with hidden intentions.

Marco exhaled softly, his heart aching for her. He pulled Loraine into a gentle embrace, patting her back soothingly as though comforting a child. "It's my fault. I shouldn't have brought up those memories. They're in the past. Don't dwell on them. As for the Cooper family, you handle them as you see fit. If you want me to stay out of it, I'll follow your lead."

Loraine's train of thought was interrupted by the warmth of Marco's arms around her. His words, filled with loyalty and tenderness, brought a simultaneous smile to her lips and a touch of emotion to her heart.

It was a sensation both amusing and deeply moving.

She leaned into him, her arms encircling his waist, and allowed herself to revel in the sincere affection enveloping her. It filled her heart and soul with a sweetness she had never known.

The hardships she had endured were now simply part of her life's tapestry, neither glorified nor lamented. Yet, the empathy and care Marco extended to the younger Loraine stirred something profound within her.

Marco seemed surprised for a moment, his eyes softening as he lovingly stroked her hair. The sensation reminded him of a Siamese cat that Jimmie had once owned, and he found himself indulging in the comforting touch.

Feeling his gentle caress, Loraine looked up at him. Marco's hand retreated quickly, an attempt to seem nonchalant that failed to escape her notice.

To his surprise, she wasn't annoyed. Instead, she smiled warmly, reaching up to grasp his shoulder before planting a playful kiss on his cheek.

She leaned in to whisper, "You're just like the Golden Retriever we have at home."

Marco's brow furrowed in confusion. "Huh?"

Loraine's smile grew knowing, her eyes twinkling with affectionate amusement. The resemblance was undeniable now.

In her eyes, Marco was akin to their lovable Golden Retriever, foolishly yet earnestly seeking her affection, bumbling but genuine in his desire to please.

"It's nothing," she said, her voice light and teasing. "Consider it a reward for comforting me, Mr. Bryant." Her tone was playful.