

## The Double 471

### Chapter 471

Jenna coughed subtly, trying to make her suggestion sound as casual as possible. “It’s just, you know, about adding each other on social media to get to know one another.”

Mirabella gave her a look that danced between amusement and annoyance.

“My cousin is in IT, a real tech wizard. In college, his team took home the gold in an international coding competition. I’m telling you, he’s really something...”

Mirabella rubbed her temples and, with an upward swipe of her hand, cut Jenna off mid—gush. “Honey, if you’re that obsessed with acing tests, I’ve got an extra box of flashcards you can have.”

Jenna’s voice halted abruptly at that. Mirabella was the devil incarnate. Finally, peace returned to Mirabella’s ears, and she lowered her gaze, returning to her writing.

After school, Vincent made his way back to the Mendoza Estate. He relayed to his grandfather, Knox, Mirabella’s exact response to the invitation he had given her earlier that day. Knox stroked his chin thoughtfully and then pulled out his cellphone to make a call.

Vincent sat quietly to the side, watching his grandfather speak with courteous ease on the phone, a flicker of surprise crossing his features.

Before long, Knox hung up and turned to his grandson. “Those new recipes | taught you a while back. Have you mastered them yet?”

Vincent met Knox’s gaze and nodded slightly. “Pretty much, yeah.” “Good,” Knox said. “You’ll be in charge of the main table’s meal tomorrow night.” Vincent blinked in surprise. “Grandpa, I’m not sure that’s such a good idea.”

He understood the gravity of the guests coming over the next evening. It wasn't a question of his culinary skills, but these high— stakes social gatherings were still a bit out of his league. He'd rather spend that time hitting the books.

"Nonsense, Knox said with gravitas. "It'll be good for you to meet some influential people-it will do wonders for your future." Vincent's cool, collected expression faltered. "Grandpa, mingling isn't exactly my forte. Maybe we should pass."

Knox shot him a look of exasperated affection, his frustration evident. Every time he tried to pave the way for his grandson, Vincent resisted. It was infuriating. Taking a deep breath, Knox shifted the conversation. "You're tight with Mirabella, aren't you?"

Vincent hesitated, then replied, "We're alright, yeah."

Knox's eyes twinkled with a plan. "Mirabella is a gifted kid. I'm considering taking her as my protégé. You guys are classmates. You're both young-you can talk to her and convey my intentions."

After a pause, Knox added, "And you can impress upon her that being mentored by the Mendoza family will mean no one in Ashford would dare cross her." She already had James, but well, more friends meant more connections.

Vincent's mouth twitched in mild annoyance, his hand instinctively going to his temple. "Grandpa, I really think you should abandon the idea of taking Mirabella as your apprentice."

Knox's brows knitted together. "Why? Ee you have lay idea "26 ibis to find so ongweith an Ceptional plate who also understands pharmacology?"

"She's a young girl, and you want her to work as a cook? Do you really think that's appropriate?"

Knox bristled at that. "Cook? She'd be a culinary ees OC ca

p stigioysthatpo ition was in ancient times?"

“But this is the modern era,” Vincent couldn’t help but point out.

Knox slammed his hand down on the

nearby table, of it? You're

always contradicting me!”

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Vincent straightened up immediately, his voice carrying a hint of determination. “Don’t you worry, I’ll find a chance to talk to Mirabella.”

After a pause, he added, somewhat reluctantly, “But don’t get your hopes up too high. She’s Ivy League—bound, with a future as bright as the Fourth of July. And it’s not just her — | doubt her folks would agree either.”

Anyone who made it into Prestige College was seen as a pillar of the nation. His grandpa sure had some wild dreams.

Knox had been somewhat appeased by the first part of Vincent’s statement, but the latter part nearly made him blow his top — again.

Vincent cleared his throat and stood up, hastily making an excuse. “Grandpa, I’ve got a mountain of homework to bury myself in tonight, so | better get back. I’ll come straight over after school tomorrow. | won’t let you down, and you can count on that.”

Knox couldn’t even bear to look at him. He just waved his hand dismissively, signaling for him to scam. Vincent then left the grand hall, instructed the butler to take good care of his grandfather, and left the family estate.

An hour later, he arrived at his place downtown, exchanged a brief hello with his folks, and was about to head upstairs when he suddenly remembered the package Mirabella had mentioned sending him that morning. He halted in his tracks.

“Mom, did we get any packages today?” Vincent asked, turning toward his mother. “I wasn’t home today,” Aimee shook her head.

It was Vincent’s dad, who looked up and chimed in, “Oh, yeah, there was a delivery. What did you order? It’s a big box and heavy as a sack of potatoes.”

Vincent was momentarily taken aback. A big, heavy box? What on earth did Mira send him?

Following his dad’s gesture toward the storage room, Vincent murmured an acknowledgment and headed in with a mix of curiosity and apprehension. The box was right there by the door, unmistakable in its bulk. It was indeed sizable.

Vincent fetched a pair of scissors and sliced through the tape, and as he peered inside, he froze, unable to process the sight.

A whole box of study materials and at least a hundred different exam papers stared back at him... Vincent suddenly recalled Mirabella’s fleeting look of annoyance that morning when he handed her his own stack of papers.

And then her question, “Are you also competing in the Math Olympiad?” It seemed from that moment on, she had plotted her sweet

revenge. No wonder her friend had given him that odd look. The trap was set right there.

Vincent’s gaze fell back on the papers inside the box, and he shuddered. He enjoyed a good puzzle, sure, but that didn’t mean he enjoyed being buried in exam papers!

It was as if he could never look at an exam paper the same way again. Quickly, he sealed the box back up. It was too horrific for words.

On the other side of town, Mirabella, having stealthily pulled off her lifeline prank, returned for dinner and remembered Adler’s data. With that in mind, she headed out once more.

There was a print and copy shop just around the corner from her neighborhood. She recovered

risperne SD er was in the middle of his meal, so he told Mirabella to download whatever she needed to print on the computer and then get his attention.

Mirabella hopped onto the owner's computer, her fingers dancing over the keyboard. After half a pul opened the prowisehogue into her ekadit and downloaded the file once again. She decrypted the file, smoothly converted the PowerPoint presentation into a document, and hit 'Print.'

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The shop owner, munching away at his counter, glanced over and saw that Mirabella was managing fine by herself, so he didn't bother getting up to check.

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Mirabella meticulously wiped her computer clean of any traces, then stood up and strolled over to the printer. She neatly folded the documents that had been printed out and slid them into her coat pocket without a second thought.

After settling the bill, she swiftly exited the print shop.

The early winter dusk had settled in sooner than expected. She had left her home under a bright sky, but now, as she stepped out of the print shop, the outside world was considerably darker, and the streetlamps of the neighborhood were casting their glow.

In the hazy light, Mirabella's figure was swathed in a sleek black trench coat, her slender legs moving with a graceful, leisurely stride along the sidewalk, hands tucked into her pockets, exuding a casual yet striking charm.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket, and, fishing it out, she saw it was James calling. She answered promptly. "Busy?" came James' crisp voice. Mirabella glanced ahead to where the neighborhood's gate was in sight and replied, "Not particularly."

James was leaning against the railing on the balcony of his two-storied villa, his gaze stretching into the distance, his chiseled features softened by gentle warmth. "I just dropped you a message. You didn't respond, so I thought you might be tied up with something."

At his words, Mirabella pulled the phone away from her ear to check the screen, and sure enough, there was an unread message from two minutes ago. She opened it, briefly scanned the contents, and after a moment's pause, she responded, "Had my phone in my pocket, didn't notice it."

The sound of a car horn filtered through from the street, audible over the phone. "You're out and about?" James asked, a hint of surprise in his tone.

"Yeah, just taking a walk around the block," Mirabella said truthfully, her voice light. After a brief pause, she inquired, "Did you need me for something?"

James' voice came back, casually nonchalant as he leaned on the balcony. "Knox's birthday dinner is tomorrow. He's asked you to join." Upon hearing this, Mirabella's gaze sharpened slightly. Knox had sent his grandson to deliver an invitation, and now James was extending it personally—she couldn't very well refuse.

After a moment of contemplation, she answered, "Alright, I'll be there."

James could detect a hint of reluctance in her tone, and raising an eyebrow in amusement, he offered, "Don't worry about a gift. I'll sort something out on your behalf."

Mirabella fell silent at that, her pride smarting a little at the implication. Still, she responded with genuine appreciation, "Thanks, James."

"You're too kind." There was a pause on the other end of the line, and then James said, "I'll pick you up after school tomorrow." As Mirabella stepped into the neighborhood, her pace quickened. "Isn't that a bit out of your way?"

"Not at all," James' voice was steady as he glanced down at the garden beneath his balcony, adding, "It's on the way."

Mirabella chuckled at that—Parkside High School was in the cornfield opposite direction from Mendocino. “Well, then, I won't argue. Thanks.”

“See you tomorrow,” he said.

“Sure thing,” Mirabella replied, ready to end the call when James added, “Head home early. It's getting late for you to be out alone.” Mirabella pulled her coat around her, her gaze deepening. Her delicate appearance seemed to invite such protective warnings. It was a bit tiresome, really.

After hanging up, she slipped her phone back into her pocket and continued towards home at an unhurried pace.

But after a short distance, Mirabella's eyes narrowed, a flicker of intrigue

and she slowed her step ever so slightly.

Was someone following her?

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Mirabella stuffed her hands into her sweater pockets, occasionally glancing down at the pavement as she walked, her silhouette exuding an air of casual relaxation that seemed at odds with her somber mood.

She had slowed her pace from earlier, and after a bit, that unsettling sensation of being followed had vanished. It was an odd occurrence that didn't sit well with her.

A rare severity shone in Mirabella's eyes.

Her phone buzzed again in her pocket. It was Shawn checking in to see why it was taking her so long to come back home. Her response was brief, assuring him she'd return shortly before hanging up.

She looped around the neighborhood a few more times, and when nothing else out of the ordinary presented itself, Mirabella leisurely strolled back home.

Upon entering the house, she exchanged a few words with Shawn, who was lounging on the couch engrossed in a TV show. Remembering the earlier incident, she asked nonchalantly, "Dad, you haven't run into any odd characters lately, have you?"

Shawn glanced at his daughter and offered her a freshly peeled orange. His brow furrowed in confusion. "Odd characters? No, why do you ask all of a sudden?" Could it be that Mirabella had spotted Grady's people again?

Mirabella accepted the orange and methodically peeled a segment, speaking with a slight muffle, "I heard there had been some unsavory characters tailing residents around here. Just keep an eye out, both you and Mom."

Shawn paused, "Really? That's happening?" "Yeah, heard about it when I went out to get some documents printed," Mirabella lied smoothly.

"Alright, I'll keep that in mind," Shawn replied, his face betraying no hint of concern. Instead, he seemed relieved. As long as his daughter hadn't noticed those from the company.

Mirabella eyed him suspiciously. His reaction seemed off. Shaking off the thought, she finished her orange and said, "Dad, I'm going to a dinner at my friend's house tomorrow night, so you don't need to pick me up in the afternoon."

Instantly curious, Shawn asked, "Is it the friend who gave you that painting last time?" Mirabella's eyes narrowed slightly, and she hummed in affirmation.

"Go ahead then, but try to come home early," Shawn said, standing up suddenly. "Wait here, I'll get something for you to bring. Can't go to dinner empty-handed..."

Mirabella quickly stood up bearing the antique inkstone Shawn had insisted she take to Jenna's last time. "No need, Dad. It's just dinner among friends. We don't do the whole gift-giving thing. It's too old-fashioned."



Shawn stopped and turned back to her, pondering for a moment before agreeing, "Alright then, maybe invite your friend over to ours

next time."

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"Sure," Mirabella nodded. "I'm heading to my room to read." "Don't stay up too late. Get some rest," Shawn said with a note of concern. Obediently, Mirabella ascended the stairs.

Once his daughter had vanished onto the second floor, S sat adk \

wh mulling vel Re 'unsavory characters' Mirabella had mentioned.

After a moment, he pulled out his phone and sent a message to Gragy. [Grady, arrange fot Xcodple thore people td Keep an eye on her but stay out of sight. We don't want to spook her.]

Back in her room, Mirabella retrieved the documents she had printed from her coat pocket, sm giving aut ithe ster ofpages eal er desk. She flipped through them briefly before pulling out her notebook from her backpack and sat down, ready to dive into her work.

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Mirabella had been scribbling on her paper for over an hour, her hand cramping slightly as she finally set down her pencil. She pinched the bridge of her nose, feeling the familiar tension headache starting to form. With a sigh, she gathered the pile of drafts that littered her desk, tearing them into shreds and tossing them into the waste bin beside her.

After mulling over her thoughts, she shot off a message to Adler on Messenger. [Your data isn't cutting it. If you force the cultivation of this viral vector, I'm afraid it might just turn into a disaster Once the message was sent, Mirabella put her phone aside and questions, she tried to focus on the task at hand.

After finishing the exam and not seeing a reply from Adlered out a mock exam her teacher had assigned. Diving into the she washed up and went to bed.

didn't bother checking her phone again. Following her nightly routine, On the other side of town, Adler stumbled out of the lab at half-past three in the morning, his unshaven face shadowed with stubble and his eyes bloodshot. He peeled off his lab coat and trudged upstairs from the basement to the kitchen. Reaching into the fridge, he grabbed a can of ice-cold beer, popped it open, and downed it in gulps. Then, he slumped onto the living room sofa.

few Leaning back, he closed his eyes for a moment, resting. But not long after, he sat up straight, grabbing his phone from the coffee table. Seeing a message from the big boss herself, Adler perked up instantly. Although he had anticipated the feedback, the bluntness of 'isn't cutting it' still felt like a punch to the gut. Didn't she know how many years the institute had toiled to get the core data to this stage? And she just dismissed it as 'not cutting it!'

Adler let out a long sigh, his head drooping as he typed 'up to snuff?]

a response. [Boss, any insights? How can we make this data seem a bit more Having sent the message, Adler didn't expect a reply from Mirabella right away, considering the late hour. She was probably resting, after all.

After pondering on the couch for a while, Adler suddenly stood up, walked to the allway, grabbed his car keys, and left the house.

The next morning, Mirabella woke to find Adler's message. She glanced at it briefly before closing the chat without a reply.

Since she was going to Knox's birthday party that evening, she chose a long coat to wear perfectly concealing it.

At lunch, Vincent came looking for Mirabella.

"The package was delivered, right?" she asked, a playful lilt in her voice.

r over her Parkside High School uniform, Vincent's face darkened. It took him a moment before he retorted, "You really have a twisted sense of humor." She had sent him one box in return for the five sets of exams he had given her.

Clearing her throat, Mirabella said solemnly, "It's all about helping each other out, right?"

Vincent scoffed coldly, clearly not appreciating her kind of help. om Changing the subject, he said, "You're coming to my grandfather's dinner tonight, aren't you?"

He knew his grandfather had called someone named James the previous evening, making a point to invite Mira over.

Mirabella nodded.

Vincent looked visibly relieved. After a moment's hesitation, he suggested, "How about we head over together after school?"

Mirabella glanced at him and shook her head. "No need, I'll be going with a friend."

Guessing that her 'friend' was the James his grandfather had called, Vincent didn't insist. Heremembered his grandfather's instructions from last night and felt a headache coming on, Looking at Mirabella, he opened his mouth to speak but then thought better of it.

## Chapter 476

Mirabella eyed Vincent with a mix of amusement and Impatience as he hemmed and hawed before her, a far cry from the unflappable, straight-shooting guy she was used to. "Spit it out, Vince," she urged, cutting through the awkward silence.

Vincent leaned back against the corridor's railing, drawing out another minute of silence before he got to the point. "My grandpa... he wants to take you on as an apprentice."

A twitch tugged at the corner of Mirabella's mouth. That stubborn old Donald hadn't given up on the idea?

Clearing his throat, Vincent, now sounding almost sheepish, which was rare for him, added, "You don't have to feel pressured. Just... give it some thought, okay?"

Mirabella was silent for a moment before replying, "I got it. I'll have a chat with your grandpa and set things straight."

"Alright, I'll see you later tonight," Vincent said, and with one last lingering glance at her, he was gone.

Mirabella headed back to class, barely settling into her seat when her phone buzzed from within her pocket. Pulling it out, she saw it was a message from Adler on Messenger.

[Hey boss, did you get my message last night? If not, I can resend it.]

Adler had been waiting for a response since the morning, plus through the lunch break at Parkside High School, and it was only now, with a bit of chagrin, that he reached out again.

He then copied and pasted his previous message, [Boss, any insights? How can we make this data seem a bit more 'up to snuff?], and hit send again.

Quick as a flash, Mirabella texted back. [No insights.]

Adler. [Seriously, I could use your help.]

Mirabella leaned on her desk, her eyes half-closed as she pondered, then straightened up and typed. [Have you guys cracked the viral vector yet?]

Adler's gaze shifted to the sealed lab that had been his world for nearly fifteen hours straight, a heavy look in his eyes. He quickly typed back. [Not yet...] Though they were close, he didn't have the heart to say so.

Mirabella had a hunch. After a brief pause, she rifled through her desk drawer, pulling out a piece of paper with a simplistic list of steps scribbled on it—her work from the previous night.

She snapped a photo with her phone and sent it to Adler. [You can use this When Adler opened the image Mirabella had sent, he zoomed in, and his a reference. No guarantees, though.]

even take the time to reply before darting off to the break room.

face transformed from shock to elation so swiftly. He didn't There, with the printer humming to life, he printed the photo and then settled into a chair with pen and paper from the drawer, diving into calculations.

Half an hour later, Adler dropped his pen, his unkempt appearance, m mirroring the stunned expression that took a while to fade as he emerged from the depths of the data.

Three years of grappling with the RO strain had yielded nothing for their research institute. The synthesis of the viral vector was notoriously complex.

When some in the institute proposed radical methods for the experiment, Adler, ever the conscientious scientist, disapproved and sought Mirabella's help instead.

Taking a deep breath, Adler couldn't help but marvel at her brilliance. Despite her youth, Mirabella's m prodigious talent was leagues beyond his own—her insights had completely clarified what had baffled him for two days. This wasn't just exceptional; it was downright otherworldly.

Adler wiped his face, reminding himself that comparing oneself to others could be a frightful thing.

Shaking off his reverie, he grabbed the papers from the desk and made a m beeline for the lab, ignoring the curious glances from his colleagues as he punched in the code and made his way inside the lab with a newfound determination.

After school, the bell rang, signaling the end of another day at Parkside High. Mirabella swiftly organized her desk, sliding her coat on as she strolled out of the classroom.

Stepping through the school gates, her eyes immediately caught sight of the familiar black sedan parked curbside. Without hesitation, she approached the vehicle.

At the front passenger side, the window was rolled down, revealing Wyatt, who leaned out with a grin, greeting Mirabella with a casual, "Hey there."

He leaned and Mirabella nodded in response and, as per her usual routine, pulled open the back door and settled into the seat.

Over as James was sprawled out comfortably, giving Mirabella a once-over as she got situated. His piercing gaze softened for a moment. "Need to change before we head out?"

She glanced down at her unbuttoned coat, revealing the Parkside High emblem emblazoned on her sweater beneath. Shrugging nonchalantly, she replied, "Nah, it's just dinner, nothing fancy."

Her free-spirited nature wasn't one for formalities, especially since Knox's birthday bash was at the family's old manor, not some uptight five-star venue. Dressing up didn't seem necessary.

"Alright," James offered a simple acknowledgment. He was dressed in a casual navy ensemble that lent him an air of effortless elegance. Despite the laid-back look, he still exuded an aura of distinction, a testament to his blue-blooded upbringing.

Mirabella found a comfortable position and casually inquired, "How's your health been lately?"

James' brows quirked playfully, and he extended his arm towards her, his sleeve sliding up to reveal a pale, refined wrist, "Take my pulse, and you'll know."

Wyatt, catching a glimpse of his boss' actions in the rearview mirror, couldn't help but mentally scoff at anyone who called his boss unromantic. These subtle flirtations were smooth as silk.

Mirabella gave James a sidelong glance, stating bluntly, "You look pretty healthy to me. No pulse-taking needed."

At that, a flicker of disappointment crossed James' eyes as he withdrew his arm, murmuring, "Just the occasional irregular heartbeat." The sound of Wyatt choking on his own saliva filled the car. "Cough, cough, cough..." He couldn't believe such a flirtatious line had just come from his stoic boss. Surely, his ears were deceiving him.

With a glance from James, Wyatt felt a chill run down his spine. He shrank back in his seat, keeping any further sounds to himself. Mirabella's delicate brows furrowed as she turned to James with a smirk. "You don't have any heart issues."

That was the verdict pure and simple, from the lips of a straightforward woman. Internally, Wyatt lamented that his boss' love life might be fraught with obstacles.

James met Mirabella's clear gaze, her own eyes free of any ulterior motives, as if she melancholy surfaced within him.

Were merely stating a fact. A twinge of

James let out a faint sigh in his heart and ambiguously said, "You wouldn't understand." Mirabella asked with each word emphasized, "Are you questioning my medical skills?"

The conversation seemed to stall, leaving a brief silence in the car as James faced his first true setback, his emotions tangled.

It looked like getting through to her would be a tall order, at least for the foreseeable future.

Then, shaking off his somber mood, James changed the subject. "Anyway, my granddad really enjoyed that incense from your place. Got any left? He's been having trouble sleeping and keeps going on about how soothing it was

Beneath the lavish gifts, there was bound to be a hidden agenda.

Mirabella glanced at James and responded with an almost emotionless tone, "Yeah, but there's not much left."

James could sense the reluctance in her voice. He casually took out his phone, opened his banking app, and transferred twelve thousand bucks to her in two quick taps.

When Mirabella's phone chimed twice, she looked at James and fished out her device. Her fingers paused over the notification of the transfer, and she said with mock severity, "Really, what's this about? It's just sandalwood. I've got plenty of that. When we get back, I'll just hand you a box. No need for all this fuss!"

James' eyes flicked to the confirmation of payment on his screen, and he After accepting the transfer, something else seemed to strike Mirabeled in response.

right?"

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and you mentioned you've had some heart palpitations, She offered generously.

James just watched her quietly, sensing he might not want to hear what was coming next.

"I'll throw in a bottle of heart pills for you, too. Good for all sorts of cardiac emergenc James was speechless, and in the driver's seat, Wyatt almost couldn't contain his laughter. Ms. Mirabella was surely heaven-sent to keep James in line. Her words never followed the expected script.

Having received a hefty sum, Mirabella turned to gaze out the car window. Her black coat made her skin even usually sharp features softened with her good mood, adding a touch of serene grace.



more striking, and her Half an hour later, they arrived at the Mendoza Estate. Numerous luxury cars were parked outside the estate, yet James' vehicle was the most unassuming and discreet among them.

Stepping out of the car, Mirabella gave a quick glance around before adjusting her coat.

Soon after, Wyatt came over with gifts in hand, handing one to Mirabella. "Ms. Mirabella, this is a present James picked out, especially for you."

She accepted it with a word of thanks.

At the entrance to the Mendoza Estate, a butler welcomed the guests. He saw James alight from the car and had already sent someone to inform Mr. Knox. He recognized the young man's esteemed status as an honored guest of the Mendoza family.

Before long, Mr. Knox emerged, his face brightening with respect upon seeing James. "James."

With a slight nod to Mr. Knox, James handed his gift to the butler. "Happy birthday. May you age like fine wine."

Mr. Knox chuckled appreciatively, "Thank you, thank you."

He then turned to Mirabella, standing beside James, his eyes lighting up. "Mirabella."

Mirabella chose to ignore his experimental gaze, and handed over her gift. "Happy birthday, Knox."

"Ha, if you'd become my apprentice, I'd be even happier," Knox jested.

Mirabella merely smiled and replied, "Then you might be too happy for your own good."

Catching the hint of rejection, Knox cleared his throat and suggested, "Let's head inside."

Taking the lead, he started towards the mansion.

James watched Knox's departing figure thoughtfully for a momentn before turning to Mirabella. "Seems like Knox really does want to take you on as his apprentice."

Raising an eyebrow, Mirabella replied with a touch of pride, "Can't help it. I'm just too exceptional."

Accustomed to her shameless confidence, James simply gave her a look and remained silent, then proceeded through the grand doors of the Mendoza Estate.

## Chapter 479

Knox was playing the gracious host today, inviting a slew of well-known and respected guests within the Ashford elite. These were old family friends with prominent social standings.

James and Mirabella were the new faces, the unknowns, never before seen mingling in these circles. So, naturally, as they stepped into the grand hall, they became the center of attention, with curious, probing gazes following the every move.

The crowd would've understood if Knox had personally welcomed a scion from one of the illustrious families, but two young outsiders? That sparked their curiosity.

However, Knox didn't spill the beans about James' identity. He simply introduced him as a distant relative, which was enough to quell the guests' curiosity and draw their attention back to their own conversations. After all, if it was just some distant kin, there wasn't much need to fuss or engage in small talk, even though James' commanding presence hinted at something different, which was enough to make anyone feel a bit of pressure with just a glance.

Knox had other guests to attend to. He settled James and Mirabella at a specially prepared table before excusing himself.

The table was laid out with a spread of delicate pastries. James casually reached out, sliding a plate of these treats in front of Mirabella, and said, "Looks like dinner won't be served for a while. Help yourself to some snacks in the meantime."

Mirabella was a foodie at heart and didn't stand on ceremony. She pinched a piece of what looked like a sponge cake and popped it into her mouth. It melted instantly, not too sweet, and just to her liking, prompting her to reach for a second, then a third piece.

Sitting poised with his striking features, James exuded an aura of 'keep your distance, but his eyes softened when they landed on the girl beside him,

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After indulging in a few bites, Mirabella stopped, her lips dusted with crumbs. She was about to fish a napkin out of her pocket when James, ever attentive, handed her one instead. She looked up at him with gratitude. "Thanks."

James raised an eyebrow and tapped his fingers lightly on the table. "No problem."

Nikolai, a longtime friend of Knox, wouldn't miss this birthday bash for the world. Having just returned from a quick trip to the restroom, he immediately noticed Mirabella. His eyes lit up, and he made a beeline towards them.

"Mirabella," he greeted. Nikolai approached with excitement, greeted James, and took a seat beside Mirabella. "That Incense of Calm recipe you gave me, I followed your instructions and succeeded." Of course, he omitted the countless trials and errors it took to achieve that modest success.

Mirabella lowered her hand and turned to Nikolai, offering a dry chuckle, as she praised him, "Impressive!"

Nikolai cleared his throat. "Your recipe was very detailed."

"That formula is quite specific. Not much use for the average person,"

e Mirabella said with a raised eyebrow.

"I'm aware," Nikolai chuckled, his thick skin apparent as he added, "Maybe you could teach me another, more common sleep aid?" Mirabella felt a twitch in her brow and quickly retorted, "I don't know any others. That's the only one I can make."

James cast a sidelong glance at her, his silence speaking volumes.

Nikolai stroked his beard, feeling a hint of disappointment. But then, he considered Mirabella a prodigy in alchemy, and making incense might not really be her focus-after all, it was quite a challenging craft.

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Nikolai didn't press further but shifted the topic with a smile, "By the way, are you into herbs?"

Mirabella raised an eyebrow in confusion at Nikolai's query.

With a chuckle, Nikolai elaborated, "I've spent the last two years cultivating some Foxglove. Maybe you'd like to take a look at my herbs garden when you have a moment?"

Mirabella's face showed a hint of surprise. She was about to respond when Asher, Nikolai's son, had quietly approached and cut in. "Dad, you're getting mixed up. We don't have any Foxglove in our garden. Let's not give anyone a reason to laugh at us."

The Reeves and Mendoza families had long been close allies, and since it was Knox's birthday, Asher naturally joined his father at the Mendoza family's birthday celebration. He hadn't expected to run into Mirabella there.

Asher had a great deal of respect for Mirabella's potion-making skills after watching her work, but that respect hadn't extended beyond professional admiration. He certainly didn't share his father's near obsession with her.

Seeing his father carelessly mention the secret cultivation of Foxglove, Asher felt compelled to intervene, emphasizing the word 'outsiders' to make his point.

Surprised by his younger son's interruption, Nikolai furrowed his brow and turned to Asher with a scolding look. "Asher, is that any way to interrupt someone?"

Asher glanced at Mirabella, but since James was also present, he maintained a polite demeanor, conveniently ignoring his father's displeasure. "Dad, Foxglove is such a rare herb. How could our family possibly have it?"

Mirabella's eyebrows arched playfully as she tapped her fingers idly on the table. James poured her another cup of tea, which she accepted and sipped gracefully.

Asher noted James' gesture with a hint of suspicion. Why would someone from the esteemed Shepherd family show such special attention to a young girl? Asher had asked his father about Mirabella before, and Nikolai told him she was just an ordinary high school student, not from any significant lineage.

Nikolai, reading his son's thoughts, darkened his expression. "It seems you didn't take in a single word of our last conversation."

Asher pursed his lips inwardly, thinking that his father was the one being naive, unaware that there were bigger fish in the sea. No matter how well-versed Mirabella was in herbs, how could a seventeen or eighteen-year-old girl possibly memorize the properties of thousands of them? It was likely she didn't even know what Foxglove was.

Nikolai, fuming inside, glared at Asher before turning back to Mirabella with some embarrassment. "Actually, the Foxglove..."

Before he could finish, Mirabella set down her cup, her eyes sparkling with mirth as she interrupted, "Mr. Asher is correct. Foxglove is indeed rare, requiring very specific soil and environmental conditions. Aside from the chance of finding it in deep, old forests, trying to cultivate it is... quite difficult."

Hearing Mirabella's words, Asher had to suppress a laugh. Which precious Cor herb didn't need a specific environment to thrive? Her general statement sounded as if she knew quite a lot about the subject.

He couldn't help but think she was putting on an act. Shaking his head, e. Asher remained silent.