

The Double 141

Chapter 141

Mirabella, clutching her belongings, twisted the knob and pushed open the door to the neighboring room.

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With a flick of the switch on the wall, the sparse room layout – one bed, one desk came into view, all cast in modern, minimalist decor and suffused with cool tones. On the wall hung two framed certificates of achievement that caught her eye.

She set her things down gently on the desk and made her way over to the certificates. Her curiosity was aroused by the recognitions they bore. One was for the prestigious Norsen Prize in Medical Biology, a hallmark of excellence within the medical community of the States, awarded triennially to individuals who exhibited extraordinary talent in the medical field. The other was the Rasko Medical Award, equally renowned on the international stage. Either accolade on its own was a testament to the significant contributions the recipient had made to medical science.

Mirabella hadn't expected that this brother of hers, whom she had never met, was a medical prodigy. She noted the date on the awards – both from five years ago. Nick would have been around twenty at that time?

Mirabella's curiosity about this Nick intensified. It was a shame he was abroad. Otherwise, it could have been an opportunity for an engaging exchange.

Shifting her focus, she drew the curtains closed, turned on the air conditioning, and waited for the room to reach the desired temperature before she began sorting through the heap of herbal ingredients on

the desk.

Creating incense sticks wasn't particularly challenging, but the trick lay in precisely calculating the amount and ratio of powdered sandalwood and medicinal herbs. While not a professional incense maker, Mirabella had a natural affinity for mixing fragrances and compounding medicines. Her ability to

combine several potent herbs without causing adverse reactions and her near-obsessive precision in understanding and manipulating medicinal properties were nothing short of extraordinary.

For her, concocting the composition for Incense of Calm was a walk in the park.

Two hours later, Mirabella set down her tools and gazed at the freshly molded incense sticks on the cutting board, exhaling deeply. All that remained was for the incense to dry out completely over the next couple of hours, signaling the success of her endeavor.

She twisted her stiff neck and glanced down at her fingers smeared with incense clay before heading to the washroom to clean up.,

After lingering in the room for another half-hour to ensure the incense was problem-free, Mirabella finally opened the door to leave. No sooner had she pulled the door shut than she saw Zach stumbling at the stairwell.

Quickening her pace, Mirabella moved toward him. Her nose was immediately assaulted by the pungent scent of alcohol. She frowned and hurriedly steadied him.

Zach, slightly inebriated but conscious, beamed at Mirabella. His grin bloomed like a flower. "Mira, did you wait up just for me to get home?"

At the sound of "Mira," Mirabella's support slackened, and Zach, caught off guard, bumped into the wall. He hissed in pain, catching himself against the wall to prevent a fall. When he turned his head, his glasses were askew, teetering on the brink of tumbling off. "You..."

Mirabella adjusted his glasses for him. Her expression was unaltered as she said, "Sorry, Zach, I don't have much strength. I couldn't hold you."

Zach, his mind muddled by alcohol, processed the words more slowly than usual. "Oh, oh, no worries. My bad."

Zach steadied himself against the wall, slowly straightening up. With a vigorous shake of his head, he turned to Mirabella and let out a goofy chuckle, "Honestly, I am not wasted."

Mirabella shook her head and, once again, reached out to steady him, replying with a half-hearted, "Yeah, I'm the one who's plastered."

"Mira, you didn't hit the bottle, did you?" Zach, sounding like a lovable oaf, leaned in closer as he spoke.

Taking a deep breath to suppress the urge to smack him, Mirabella pushed his head to the side, grabbed his arm, and dragged him toward his room. It hardly took any effort at all. "Hold on, I'll get you some water," she said, quickly leaving the room after dumping him on the bed.

In no time, she returned with a glass of tinted water to find Zach had rolled off the bed onto the floor, muttering something incomprehensible.

Pressing her fingers to her temples, she walked over with a grim expression and hoisted him back onto the bed.

"Drink this," she commanded, bringing the glass to Zach's lips.

Zach looked at her with bleary eyes, not touching the water, just grinning like a fool, "Mira..."

Mirabella, done with subtlety, forcibly fed him the water with practiced ease, not spilling a single drop. After all, those years of medicating household pets weren't for nothing.

Soon after drinking, Zach calmed down and promptly fell into a deep sleep. Mirabella sat in the room for half an hour, ensuring he wouldn't cause any more trouble, before heading back to her

own.

The next morning was a Saturday. Zach woke up expecting a pounding headache and misery. but surprisingly, he felt nothing amiss. It was as if he hadn't touched a drop of liquor the night before.

How bizarre!

He got out of bed, took a quick shower, changed into fresh clothes, and after making sure he was free of any booze smell, he stepped out of his room and went downstairs.

Delilah had an early appointment with a designer, so the house was quiet except for Shawn and Mirabella, who were having breakfast.

Zach pulled up a chair, and as he rubbed his sore shoulder, he glanced at Mirabella. "You took care of me all night, didn't you, Mirabella? Thanks for that."

He only remembered reaching the top of the stairs and his sister supporting him. Everything after was a blackout.

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Pausing, he asked uneasily, "I... didn't made a scene last night, did I?"

Mirabella lifted her head, a small smile on her lips. "I don't think so."

Zach's mouth twitched. What did she mean by 'think?' Did he or did he not?

"You should drink less, Zach. Otherwise, you'll always need your little sister to look after you. Look at her, she is so petite, doesn't it prick your conscience?" Shawn chimed in with a displeased look. His daughter hadn't even taken care of him!

Zach pushed up his glasses, then took another look at Mirabella. She was thin, indeed, but petite? She was nearly five foot seven – was that petite? Was his dad biased about height?

“What’s with your shoulder? You’ve been rubbing it non–stop,” Shawn observed.

Mirabella’s spoon paused mid–air for a split second.

“Oh, must’ve bumped it somewhere last night when I was drunk. It’s just a bit sore.” Zach replied nonchalantly.

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Mirabella arched an eyebrow, cocking her head as she looked at him. “Did you black out?”

Zach paused, his brain clicking into gear. “That’s a loaded question if I ever heard one.”

Her smile was a mix of mirth and mystery. “Nope, just echoing Dad’s wisdom. You really gotta cut back on the booze.” With that, she returned her focus to her breakfast, her movements serene and deliberate.

Scratching his head, Zach couldn’t shake the feeling that something had gone down last night that he was clueless about, something that had to do with his aching shoulder.

After they finished their meal, Mirabella headed upstairs to the room, intent on packing away the incense she had crafted the night before.

Having the day off from the office, Zach trailed after her. His curiosity was piqued when she entered Nick’s room. He followed suit. Stepping inside, he was greeted by the subtle scent of sandalwood.

Mirabella was there, precision in her hands as she sliced the incense. She noticed Zach out of the corner of her eye but didn’t shy away from his gaze.

“What’s this, Mira?” Zach picked up a small stick of the incense, lifting it to his nose. “Sandalwood?”

Without missing a beat, she hummed an affirmation.

His eyes swept over the tools on the table with surprise. “You know how to make incense?” Though Zach wasn’t exactly an aficionado of aromatics, he knew a couple of friends who dabbled in the craft enough to be familiar with the basics. The thought that his sister, who had grown up in a quiet town,

could be so adept at this craft and exude such a natural elegance while doing it was genuinely astonishing.

“Learned a thing or two,” Mirabella said softly, eyes downcast. In no time, she had finished packaging the incense into a small box.

Zach stroked his chin thoughtfully. This incense was too well-crafted to be the work of a novice. After a moment, he asked casually, “Did you pick up these skills while staying with Catherine? Did she arrange a professional teacher for you?”

Mirabella looked up, her eyes reflecting a quiet confidence. “No, I taught myself.” She was the only one bold enough to mix special herbs with the sandalwood.

Zach’s potential compliment about Catherine’s mentoring skills was cut short by Mirabella’s admission of self-teaching. He was left speechless. Alright then, ever since his sister had come back, he had become the unwitting backdrop to her brilliance.

Unaware of Zach’s inner turmoil, Mirabella pulled out her phone and tapped open Messenger. She sent a message to James. [You there? The incense I mentioned last time is ready. Should we meet up so I can give it to you?] Despite his earlier refusal, she felt obligated to return the

favor.

As her phone chimed with a reply, she glanced at the message, then slipped the phone back into her pocket. Turning to Zach, she said. “I’ve got to run an errand.” With the box of calming incense in hand, she headed for the door.

Zach, who had been silently hoping for a sisterly gift of her homemade incense, was taken aback as she walked away with it. He hurried after her, abandoning all pretense of dignity as he asked, "Mira, don't I get a piece of the incense you made?" There was a hint of playful reproach in his voice.

Mirabella stopped and gave him a thorough once-over. "You're not sick, so you don't need it."

Zach choked on his response. Wasn't the point that everyone present should get a share?

Especially when he was her dear brother!

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Half an hour later, at a downtown coffee shop.

As Mirabella stepped into the private booth, a faint scent of sandalwood greeted her—a scent reminiscent of what she had encountered the previous day at a boutique store named Nature's Apothecary.

"Hello." James announced, comfortably seated before a coffee set, his movements graceful as he brewed coffee. Not far from his hand, a small Incense burner released gentle wisps of

smoke.

Mirabella gave a slight hmm, acknowledging Wyatt with a polite nod before making her way over to a mahogany chair, which she pulled out and sat down on with casual ease.

Wyatt stole a cautious glance at Mirabella. For some reason, every time he saw this young lady, he felt a chill that seemed beyond her years, an aura of mystery he couldn't quite

penetrate.

James placed a cup in front of Mirabella, his pale and slender fingers deftly pouring a stream of coffee into the cup. "See how you like the taste."

Mirabella lifted the cup, and the delicate aroma of the tea enveloped her senses. She took a sip, and her eyebrows rose in approval. "Rich fragrance, sweet and lingering on the finish. Nice."

Setting down the teapot, James' features softened with a genteel warmth. He looked relaxed yet uncontained as he mentioned, "I heard you entered an international competition?"

At his words, Mirabella seemed to ponder for a moment. Leaning back in her chair, she looked up at James. "Catherine's been bending your ear again?"

A light smile played on James' lips, his response enigmatic, "Well, as a tutor, I ought to make some contribution."

Stroking her chin, Mirabella replied casually, "Ah, no need for contributions. Just keep Catherine in good spirits for me."

Wyatt, who had been quietly observing, suddenly choked as if something caught him off guard. He was coughing violently, "Cough... cough..."

Mirabella looked up at him, puzzled. James also glanced at Wyatt before he addressed her previous comment. "Sure, naturally."

Just as Wyatt had calmed down from the initial shock of Mirabella's bold request, he was again stunned by his boss' agreeable response. Was it him who was off today, or was it his ears playing tricks on him? Or perhaps James wasn't the boss he knew?

"Do you need me to find you a professional tutor?" James asked, refilling Mirabella's cup with more coffee.

With a light tap of her fingertip on the table, Mirabella declined, "Thank you, but no."

James dropped the subject and took to sipping his coffee.

Quiet settled in the booth, a comfortable silence that wasn't the least bit awkward. After a short while, Mirabella glanced at her watch and started to pick up her bag, handing it to James. "This incense should be of some help to you."

Pausing briefly, she finished her coffee in one gulp and stood up. "Great coffee, thanks for the hospitality. I should get going."

"I'll walk you out."

"No need to trouble yourself. I'll just hail a cab," Mirabella declined James' offer and, without further ado, made her way to the door.

James watched her go and, after a brief moment of thought, called out, "Wait."

Mirabella turned back, "Yes?"

With a smile, James picked up a box of coffee beans from the table and approached her. "Take this with you. When you run out, come back for more."

Wyatt, witnessing this exchange, was again astounded. Mirabella had gifted just a simple box of incense, and James reciprocated with a limited edition box of coffee beans... Wyatt's eyes must be deceiving him again.

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Oblivious to Wyatt's expression, Mirabella didn't stand on ceremony with James, gratefully accepting the gift with a simple, "Thanks a bunch." She remembered her dear father was quite a fan of coffee. This would surely make his day.

Before long, Mirabella had left the private room.

After she was gone, Wyatt finally spoke up. "James, what's so special about this girl? She seems like your average high school student to me."

James' gaze was distant, as if his thoughts were far in another world. He glanced at Wyatt before settling back into his chair, his voice casual, "A year ago, she saved my life."

Wyatt's eyes widened with surprise. This was news to him. James had never mentioned it before. Curiosity tinged Wyatt's voice. "How did a kid like her manage to save you?"

James took a sip from his cup, his handsome face taking on a pensive look. After a moment, he said. "That's something I'm still trying to figure out myself."

Wyatt was taken aback.

James then took out a long wooden box from the paper bag, its craftsmanship rough and simple, a stark contrast to the elegant box he had once given to Catherine. Staring at it, a rare expression of wistfulness crossed James' face. For the first time, he felt what it was like to be on the receiving end of favoritism.

Wyatt was tempted to ask more, but seeing his boss' odd expression, he turned his attention to the wooden box in James' hands instead. He couldn't help but notice its poor quality. The corner of his mouth twitched involuntarily."

"That's a huge loss," Wyatt muttered under his breath. That box of coffee beans from James could probably fetch a thousand of these cheap boxes, right?

Wyatt, unable to bear the sight, covered his face, then coughed and said, "Ms. Mirabella sure meant well, but maybe you should stick with the incense Nikolai gave you. Maybe... I could take this box off your hands?"

The outside packaging looked shoddy, and he dreaded to imagine the quality of the incense inside.

James gave Wyatt a sidelong glance. “You said it yourself. It’s the thought that counts. Wouldn’t it be inappropriate to just hand it off to you?” With that, James lowered his gaze and fiddled with the clasp on the box, easily flipping it open.

Wyatt touched his nose, mumbling. “What’s inappropriate about it? Besides, with the way you are now, you’re hardly the type to use low-grade incense. It’d be better off with me... it might be good for something.” Like getting rid of that odd smell at home?

As soon as James opened the box, a rich aroma of sandalwood enveloped the room. There was also a subtle medicinal scent that made the air feel instantly soothing.

James narrowed his eyes, glancing at the incense burner nearby, still wafting smoke. After thinking for a moment, he extinguished the remaining sandalwood and reached for a lighter. He lit one of the sticks Mirabella had given him.

Soon, the room was filled with a more distinctive sandalwood fragrance. Though rich, it was not at all stifling when inhaled. Instead, it gradually morphed into a light medicinal scent.

Wyatt caught the scent, and his expression changed. “This smells like... sandalwood, but not quite?”

After a long silence, James’ soft voice carried through the room. “This is the genuine Incense of Calm.”

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Wyatt’s eyes flew open in alarm, staring at James. “The real Incense of Calm? How is that even possible...?”

James pinched the incense to extinguish it, handling it with care as he placed it back in the box. “That’s the scent.”

Wyatt’s face transitioned rapidly from shock to a wild elation. “If it truly is the Incense of Calm, then perhaps your condition could see a dramatic improvement.”

James fell silent for a beat, then added, “No, perhaps this one is even more special than the Incense of Calm I’ve used before.”

Wyatt was speechless. The true Incense of Calm was exceedingly rare, practically priceless, and the one in James’ possession seemed to surpass it in quality. Wyatt swallowed hard. He couldn’t even imagine its value.

Recalling his earlier assumption that it was a low-grade incense and his bold request to take some home and use it as an air freshener, Wyatt now felt an urge to bury himself in the ground. Thankfully, James hadn’t been fooled by his charade. Had James actually given it to him, Wyatt feared he would have been branded a sinner for ages.

Still, Wyatt’s gaze returned to the box of incense, and after a few seconds of contemplation, he proposed. “Perhaps we should have Nikolai take a look at it?”

It wasn’t that Wyatt doubted the incense, but if it was more special than the Incense of Calm, they needed further confirmation on whether it would be even better for James’ health.

At that moment, Wyatt had forgotten the words Mirabella had said when she handed the incense to James. “This should be of some help to you.”

Half an hour later, at Nature’s Apothecary.

When Nikolai lit a stick of the Incense of Calm and inhaled its aroma, his complexion changed. His fingers trembled as he pointed at it. “This indeed is the Incense of Calm. The creator is a genius. They’ve blended several medicinal herbs with the sandalwood base, which has a calming effect, and the medicinal afternotes that can repair bodily functions. They’d have to come up with such a blend with decades of medical experience.

“Marvelous, truly marvelous!” Nikolai exclaimed, then looked up at James. “This Incense of Calm must have been tailor-made, right?”

James looked at Nikolai with a deep gaze. “What makes you say that?”

“Because the mixed herbs are tailored to help with your current health condition. A herb like Cureroot is quite potent. Ingesting it directly might further harm your body, which is why I’ve refrained from prescribing such herbs for internal use.”

Nikolai shook his head with a wry smile, continuing, “But it’s been ground into a powder and mixed with the sandalwood to be used externally. This way, its medicinal properties will be

maximized. That’s why I said this incense must have been specifically crafted for you.”

James, deep in thought, didn’t reply immediately.

Nikolai looked at him, his voice tinged with hope, “James, might you introduce me to the person. who made this incense?”

James snapped out of his reverie, a wry smile on his face as he shook his head. “To be honest, the incense was a gift, and I’m certain the giver isn’t versed in herbal medicine.”

With a hint of disappointment in his eyes, Nikolai didn’t press the matter further.

Standing beside Nikolai, Ethan perked up when he heard the mention of the medicinal ingredients. He was the one who had sold the herbs to Mirabella. For some reason, he remembered the young lady who had bought the same herbs the day before. She had even inquired about sandalwood. But then he shook his head dismissively. Coincidences like that just didn’t happen in the real world.

“Nikolai,” Wyatt interjected, breaking his silence, “what you’re saying is that if Mr. James uses this incense for his treatment, there’s a chance he could recover, right?”

Chapter 148

The weekend had zipped by in a blur, and before anyone knew it, Monday rolled around with all the subtlety of a freight train.

At the break of dawn, the school bulletin board was swamped with students eager to see the results of last week’s exams. The monthly assessment had been notoriously tough. It was a ten on the difficulty

scale. The heads-up for the tests came out of nowhere, so scores across the board had taken a nosedive.

But that was old news. The real buzz was Mirabella from The Advanced Class. Rumors had been swirling about her dismal performance in English, of all things.

Around the bulletin board, a crowd had gathered thick as thieves, all jostling for a peek at the rankings. But when the top name came into view, a collective gasp cut through the morning air.

In first place, with a whopping 692 points, was none other than Mirabella. Trailing by a hair's breadth in second, was Vincent with 691 points. And not far behind, in third, was Peter, with 683 points.

"Shut the front door! Who was the joker spreading rumors about Mirabella's English grade last week? She's scored top of the class for crying out loud!"

"Seriously, who's the sour grape that spread that nonsense? Jealous much?"

"Vincent's been king of the hill for two years running, and now he's been dethroned by a single point? By a transfer student, no less? That's some serious competition."

"Between you and me, I heard Mirabella's English really was in the gutter, and she got a right earful from her teacher. We all saw it go down.",

"So let me get this straight... she can bomb English and still come out on top? Does that mean she aced everything else?"

"Suddenly, it makes sense why the school put Mirabella in the last exam room. They knew she was special."

"I wonder if all those folks who said she got in by pulling strings or cheated in the competitions feel like eating crow right about now."

...

Amidst the chatter, Summer stood rooted to the spot, her gaze frozen on the bulletin board. The chill in her eyes could've frosted over the Sahara. Her hands were balled into fists at her sides. Again, it was Mirabella! Why did everything have to change the moment she came back?

"Summer, you okay?" Madeline asked, catching a glimpse of Summer's dark expression after checking her own scores.

Snapping back to reality, Summer's eyes softened as she turned to Madeline, feigning nonchalance. "How'd you do on the test?"

Madeline hesitated, convinced she'd just seen a glimpse of something unnerving in Summer's eyes. "Oh, it was brutal. I only got 615. Dropped out of the top fifty. I'm freaking out about getting kicked out of Prodigy Class."

Summer offered a half-hearted comfort. "That won't happen."

"Fingers crossed!" Madeline glanced at the name at the top of the list again, wisely choosing not to mention Mirabella in front of Summer. "You're still doing great, though. You scored 670, That's nearly twenty points up from last semester."

Madeline was at a loss for words. She had been ready to see Mirabella fall flat, expecting to relish in her downfall. But the tables had turned.

Summer's lips twisted in a fleeting sneer. What did it matter if she'd improved by twenty points? In comparison to Mirabella, it was like she hadn't moved an inch.

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Summer cast one last desolate glance at the bulletin board where the test scores were posted. Her lips were sealed in a tight line as she turned on her heel and walked away.

Madeline watched her friend's retreating figure, heaving a deep sigh that seemed to carry the weight of the world. Even though Summer didn't voice her disappointment, Madeline knew the sting was there, buried deep. After all, Summer had poured every ounce of her spare time into studying, a heartbreaking and admirable dedication.

But what could you do... when you were outshone by a country bumpkin foster child?

Shaking her head as if to clear her mind of this unsettling thought, Madeline hurried to catch up with Summer.

On the other hand, Mirabella hadn't bothered to check the test scores on the bulletin board. She knew her score well enough. Annette had called her into the office last week and given her the rundown.

As for her ranking, she had researched the score trends for Parkside High before she even enrolled, and with her latest scores in mind, she figured she might not have snagged the top spot, but second place was well within reach. After all, English was her Achilles' heel, much

h to her chagrin.

Jenna returned from viewing the scores and found Mirabella in a state of Zen-like calm, which did nothing to soothe her own tangled emotions. Ever since she'd heard about Mirabella's struggles with English, she had been secretly reveling in the potential downfall. Having been on the receiving end of life's blows too often, she thought fate owed her a bit of schadenfreude. The thought of Mira facing her Waterloo was a delicious one indeed.

But as it turned out, Waterloo was a pipe dream—at least for Mirabella.

She's a rock-solid first place in the grade!

Perhaps sensing Jenna's begrudging gaze, Mirabella turned her head and, in a rare moment of outreach, asked, "Are you done staring? How did you do?"

“You got 692 points. Top of the class,” Jenna said, pointedly not mentioning her own score. After a brief pause, she added with a mix of sarcasm and awe. “And here you were, saying English isn’t your strong suit. You’re just playing with us!”

“If English wasn’t my weak point, I probably wouldn’t have scored 692,” Mirabella responded with a casual shrug.

At that, Jenna’s mouth twitched in a wry expression. It was always the unexpected jabs that hurt the most, but luckily, she was used to it. Shaking her head, Jenna continued, “You know Vincent from the Prodigy Class was the perpetual top scorer before you showed up. He was only one point behind you in this exam.”

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Jenna held up a finger for emphasis. “One point, do you get how close that is? He might overtake you next time, especially with your so-called weak subject”

At the mention of the name Vincent, Mirabella recalled a competitor who had placed just behind her in the BrainSpark Nationals, taking second place both times,

“Vincent’s quite the proud one. Now that you’ve parachuted in and snatched his top spot, you’re probably his public enemy number one,” Jenna mused, resting her chin in her hands before continuing.

“But hey, Vincent’s drop dead gorgeous. If he’s got his sights set on you, it might not be such a bad thing.”

Mirabella glanced at Jenna, who was practically swooning over the guy, and quipped lightly. “Drooling much?”

Jenna instinctively touched her lips, then realized she’d been teased and shot Mirabella a pouty glare, “Queen Mira, you’re getting sneakier by the day.”

Tilting her head, Mirabella's brows arched in amusement. Her carefree gaze was tinged with lazy defiance, and her stunning features once again left Jenna swallowing hard.

Forget Vincent: Mira was the epitome of cool.

After the test scores were released, any doubts about Mirabella that had been circulating around Parkside High dissipated by the end of the morning.

As for Summer, the exam results left her in a state of irritable unrest throughout the entire day.

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It took every ounce of patience for Summer to make it to the last period of study hall. She seized the opportunity to concoct an excuse about needing to return to her artist camp for training. With a slightly hesitant request, she approached Morgan for a leave of absence.

Morgan, who typically frowned upon students making a habit of ducking out early, was nonetheless swayed by the noticeable uptick in Summer's recent test scores and granted her

the pass.

Stepping through the school gates, the day's accumulated pressure began to dissipate. Summer slipped on her mask and sunglasses, blending into the crowd as she paused at the curb. Her fingers danced over her phone, eventually landing on a familiar number – Zach Davis. She hesitated for a moment before hitting the call button. Zach, who was currently wrapped up in court proceedings, had entrusted his phone to his assistant, a guardian of his privacy. The assistant knew the significance of a call from a personal number and didn't answer when Summer's attempts came through.

After two unanswered calls, Summer didn't bother trying again. A wry smile played on her lips, hidden beneath her shades, as her eyes flashed with a knowing darkness.

Had the years of comradery truly fallen short against the weight of blood ties? Had it come to the point where even her calls went ignored? Mirabella really was quite the force to be reckoned with.

With a cynical chuckle, Summer flagged down a taxi and rattled off an address.

Half an hour later...

“What brings you by out of the blue, Summer? Didn’t you have class this afternoon?” Emmitt dismissed his secretary and poured a glass of water for Summer.

She accepted it with a nod of thanks. Her mask and sunglasses now rested on the table as she spoke warmly. “The last period was just study hall, nothing too pressing. I was hoping to catch lunch with Zach, but he wasn’t picking up. Maybe he’s tied up with something.”

There was a tinge of disappointment in her voice, which didn’t escape Emmitt’s notice. He glanced at his watch subtly before replying. “He’s probably busy.”

“It’s been ages since we all got together. Why don’t you give Zach a ring later, Emmitt?” Summer suggested softly, taking a sip from her glass.

Emmitt’s thoughts drifted to something Zach had mentioned a few days ago. After a brief pause, he replied, “He seems swamped these days. Let’s not bother him for now. We can plan something when he’s less occupied.”

A faint tension gripped Summer’s hand around the glass, but she casually set it down. “Sure, that works too.” After a pause, she added, “I just don’t want Zach to get the wrong idea.

“What do you mean?” Emmitt’s brow furrowed, not quite catching her drift.

Summer bit her lip, her voice dropping to a whisper, “After the incident last time, Mira’s been avoiding me. And now Zach isn’t answering my calls... I can’t help but worry he might be

getting the wrong impression.”

Emmitt's expression grew more concerned as he listened, taking a while before responding in a measured tone, "You're overthinking it. Zach isn't one to be easily influenced by rumors."

Summer's face momentarily stiffened, then relaxed, "Well, that's a relief."

"Make yourself comfortable for a bit. I've got some things to wrap up." Emmitt turned back to his desk, immersing himself in his work.

Silence enveloped the office, leaving Summer sitting there, lost in thought. Watching Emmitt pore over his documents, she felt an unfamiliar awkwardness, a void where conversation used to be. It was as if today marked some peculiar occasion, a day where everything and everyone seemed to be shifting, subtly but surely.

Summer was growing weary of this uneasy sense of losing grip on the world around her.