

## The Double 161

### Chapter 161

Delilah eyed the middle-aged man blocking their path with a flicker of recognition, but she couldn't quite place where she'd seen him before. Puzzled, she inquired, "And you are?"

"The lady of the house has requested the pleasure of your company at the café up ahead," the middle-aged man replied, his manner polite yet laced with an undercurrent of haughtiness that was unmistakable. He was the Gilbert family's butler.

Delilah narrowed her eyes slightly. "The lady of the house?"

The butler nodded, maintaining a tone that was neither servile nor overbearing, "Mrs. Gilbert. Miss Mirabella's adoptive mother."

Delilah's expression darkened ever so slightly, "What does she want with us?"

"I'm not entirely privy to the details, but if you accompany me, all shall be revealed," the butler said smoothly, stepping aside but clearly not intending to leave without escorting them.

Delilah frowned, her disdain for Mandy palpable. Mandy's airs of a high-society matron grated on Delilah, not to mention Mandy's past mistreatment of Mirabella. Without hesitation, Delilah declined, "I'm sorry, but we're short on time."

The butler seemed to have anticipated her refusal and added, "The matter Mrs. Gilbert wishes to discuss pertains to Miss Mirabella."

At that, Delilah swallowed her objections. Shawn placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

and addressed the butler, "Well then, we shall honor her request and see her."

The butler's lips pursed slightly as he gestured for them to follow, leading the way.

Delilah glanced at her husband, annoyance lacing her voice, "I really don't want to see that woman."

Shawn offered a reassuring smile, "You could wait in the car, and I'll handle it."

"Well, I'd like to see what kind of stunt she's trying to pull now," Delilah snorted, catching up to the butler.

Soon, they entered the café. The place wasn't crowded, and Mandy sat at a window-side table on the right. As Delilah and Shawn approached, they overheard Mandy instructing, "John, please inform the manager that we'd like some privacy. No interruptions."

Her makeup was impeccable, her voice indifferent as she gave her orders. Delilah gave Mandy a once-over, her internal verdict succinct – pretentious.

"Certainly, madam," the butler bowed slightly and made his way to the manager at the front.

Once the butler had left, Mandy finally turned her attention to Delilah, envy flickering through her eyes.

Delilah had been a beauty in her youth and maintained her appearance meticulously. Her

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face was virtually unmarred by time, looking no more than in her thirties. Coupled with her poise and elegance, she outshone the typical society matron. Mandy resented Delilah deeply. In her mind, Delilah was just someone from humble beginnings, pretending to exude

class.

With a forced smile, Mandy gestured to the seats opposite her, "Please, have a seat. Order whatever you like. It's on the house."

Delilah found Mandy's feigned hospitality amusing but said nothing. She took a seat without

ceremony.

Foregoing coffee, Delilah rested her hands on the table and met Mandy's gaze, cutting straight to the chase, "Let's dispense with the pleasantries, shall we? I'd appreciate it if you could get to the point."

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Mandy leisurely sipped her coffee before locking eyes with Delilah. "I want you to transfer Mirabella to a different school. Any school other than Parkside High will do. I have

connections. I can make it happen."

Delilah blinked, taken aback. "I'm sorry, I'm not quite following. Why should my daughter have to transfer?"

"Because she's affecting Summer," Mandy said bluntly, no mincing words.

Delilah couldn't help but laugh. "As far as I know, our daughters aren't even in the same class. What kind of 'effect' are we talking about?"

"You should really ask your daughter what she did to Summer," Mandy said, her voice tinged with accusation.

Frowning, Delilah was about to retort when Mandy cut in again. “Look, your daughter’s grades. aren’t the best. She’s struggling to keep up at Parkside High. Maybe a fresh start at a different school would be better for her self-esteem.”

Delilah stared incredulously at Mandy. Was she seriously suggesting Mirabella, who topped. her class, had poor grades? It was like a joke.

Ignoring Delilah’s skeptical look, Mandy pulled out a check she had prepared earlier. “Thist should cover it. Keep your daughter away from the Gilbert family from now on.”

Delilah glanced at the check and then back at Mandy, who looked like she had never seen so much money in her life. Delilah nearly chuckled. Five hundred thousand. Was that it? Mirabella’s custom

wardrobe alone cost more than that. But the money wasn’t the point.

“I just want to know how my daughter supposedly bullied Summer,” Delilah redirected the conversation.

Mandy didn’t really know what Mirabella had done, but she remembered her daughter’s hurt. feelings. Impatiently, she said, “Just ask your daughter.”

“So, you don’t actually know?” Delilah’s tone was mocking.

Having dealt with Mandy’s irrationality before, Delilah stood up. “Sorry, but my daughter isn’t going anywhere.”

She picked up the check from the table, let it flutter to the ground, and raised an eyebrow defiantly. “This little amount wouldn’t even cover my daughter’s expenses. With that, she grasped her husband’s hand and walked out with an air of arrogance.

Mandy's face turned a shade of thunderous purple, especially after Delilah's dismissive check-tossing gesture. She was so furious that she nearly threw her coffee. "Ignorant, foolish, pretentious!" Mandy seethed under her breath.

The butler beside her quickly scooped up the check from the floor. "Madam, please, calm down. They're just a couple who've never been anywhere. They're not worth your time."

Mandy's gaze drifted to the window, where she caught sight of Delilah and Shawn getting into their old Santana. She scoffed disdainfully. "You're right. Why bother with people who've never seen the world?" Mandy sneered and turned away as if one more glance would sully

her.

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Back in the car, Delilah's haughty expression had fallen away, replaced by irritation. "I'm so annoyed. What's up with the Gilbert family? They just come up and demand Mirabella switch schools as if they own the place!"

Shawn turned to look at his fuming wife and couldn't help but laugh. "The way you tossed that check was super cool."

Delilah shot him a glare, her voice tinged with exasperation. "Is the check toss really the point? They're accusing Mira of bullying Summer, Mira is so sweet-natured. How could she possibly bully anyone? This is just absurd!"

Through the time they'd spent together, Delilah had come to understand her daughter's temperament pretty well. Even when Emmitt misunderstood her, she couldn't be bothered to engage, her indifference being such that she was more likely to be bullied than to bully

others.

Shawn was silent for a couple of seconds before he spoke, "I think Summer must have said something at home; otherwise, the Gilberts wouldn't have come after us today."

Delilah frowned, "But to say our girl bullied Summer, I just don't believe it."

Shawn crossed his arms, "Why don't we just ask Mira when she gets out of her exam later? That'll clear things up."

"Right," Delilah sighed, her thoughts drifting back to Mandy's expression when she whipped out that check. Turning to her husband, she said with a tinge of frustration, "Shawn, do you think we've been too low-profile?"

Shawn stroked his chin, eyeing the Santana emblem on the steering wheel, and for the first time, he found himself agreeing with his wife, "I think so, too."

Being smacked with a check in public? That was just unbelievable.

An hour later, the competition ended.

Mirabella handed in her paper and walked out of the exam room with her usual nonchalant grace. Unlike the other students who looked stressed post-exam, her ease suggested the test had been predictably simple for her.

After a quick stop in the restroom, Mirabella emerged to see a tall, lean young man standing against a wall in the hallway. He was looking down, allowing only his profile to be seen.

Mirabella barely glanced at him before looking away, but as she passed by, he finally raised his head and called out to her in a cool voice. "Mirabella."

Her stride paused, and she turned, getting a clear view of the boy's handsome, expressionless face. With a slightly raised eyebrow, she asked, "And you are?"

The boy wasn't upset by her lack of recognition. He smiled slightly, his deep eyes lighting with a fierce resolve "You're strong. A worthy opponent for me"

"But I won't lose to you in this competition again," he said confidently, then formed and waded away.

Watching his retreating figure, Mirabella was momentarily dumbfounded, touching her one Had she just been challenged?

After a brief delay in the restroom, Mirabella exited the main doors to find most of the other students and parents had already left. She was one of the last to depart

Delilah and Shawn, who had been waiting, hurried over to her, "Mira, why are you out so late today? Were the questions difficult?" Delilah asked with concern, recalling that her daughter was usually among the first to finish.

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Mirabella gave Delilah a gentle shake of her head, her voice soft, "No biggie, just got held up in the restroom for a bit."

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Upon hearing this, Delilah reached out to take her hand. "Let's hit the road. Hop in the car."

Mirabeila felt the warmth from Delilah's hand. A moment of stillness took her, and her fingers curled slightly. In the end, she did not pull away, allowing Delilah to lead her.

Once in the car, Delilah, as usual, inquired about the day's exams. Then, glancing at her husband driving in front, she cleared her throat and asked, "Mira, honey, how are you finding Parkside High? Anything you're not used to? Anyone giving you a hard time?"

Mirabella raised an eyebrow, turning to look at Delilah. "What's with the sudden concern?"

Delilah chuckled sheepishly, "Well, we've been swamped lately, and we kinda dropped the ball on checking in with you about the new school. Just thought I'd ask."

"It's all good. No bullies," Mirabella replied with a laid-back tone.

"How about Summer? You guys mingling much at school?" Delilah asked casually, pretending not to dwell on it.

"We're not in the same class. We haven't really talked," Mirabella said, keeping to herself the fact that Summer had approached her once. It didn't seem necessary to bring it up.

Delilah didn't strike Mirabella as someone who would bring someone up out of the blue, and her gaze seemed a bit elusive, clearly harboring something. After a few seconds of thought, Mirabella said, "Mom, if you've got something on your mind, you can just ask."

Delilah met her daughter's clear, bright eyes and suddenly felt a pang of regret. How could she let the Gilbert family's words sway her? Questioning her own daughter about whether she had been causing trouble at school, especially to Summer, would be hurtful. It would only show her daughter a lack of trust.

Shaking her head, Delilah smiled, "It's nothing. Just asking."

"Okay." Seeing that Delilah wasn't going to elaborate, Mirabella didn't press further.

The next afternoon, right as school let out, Mirabella's phone buzzed in her pocket. It was a message from James.

She remembered that he was supposed to drop off some coffee beans today, and quickly typed three words with a smile. [Give me five.]



She packed up her textbooks, slung her backpack over her shoulder, and strode out of the classroom.

In the driver's seat, Wyatt kept glancing at the exquisitely wrapped canister of coffee beans

on the backseat, contemplating one more attempt to convince James, "Sir, maybe we should just give the old man's coffee back, huh?"

James, legs casually crossed, glanced at Wyatt. "Since when did you get so chicken?"

Wyatt scratched his head, realizing to himself that it wouldn't be James to get in trouble for sneaking the coffee beans out. If the old man found out, Wyatt would catch the worst of it.

Soon enough, Mirabella appeared at the school gate. She took five minutes to get from the exit to the car. James tapped his watch. His expression collected as he handed Mirabella the coffee without hesitation or regret. Wyatt watched, inwardly exclaiming that it was easy to be generous with what was not yours.

Mirabella didn't bother to open the box. She just pursed her lips and smiled at James, "Thanks a bunch."

James' eyebrows lifted slightly, his voice smooth, "You're welcome."

"You're looking much better," Mirabella added, giving James a casual once-over.

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James leaned casually against the door of his sleek black car. His sleeves were rolled up to reveal his wrists. His eyes, with a playful glint, rested on Mirabella. His lips curved into a half-smile as he spoke teasingly, "Because your incense works wonders."

Mirabella arched an eyebrow. Her face lit up with a blend of brilliance and brazen pride. "Of course it does."

Just then, Wyatt, who had been fiddling with the GPS, chimed in without missing a beat. “Ms. Mirabella, you’re acquainted with that boutique owner, aren’t you? I placed an order the other day, and the chap threw in a buy–one–get–one–free deal for me.”

Caught off–guard, Mirabella turned to Wyatt, her voice laced with curiosity, “Which boutique owner?”

James facepalmed.

As Wyatt started the engine, he elaborated, “The one from that perfume shop you recommended to James.”

After a brief moment of puzzlement, Mirabella’s face lit up with realization. “We don’t know each other.”

“Huh, really? I thought there was some connection, hence the discount, Wyatt mused absent–mindedly.

Narrowing her eyes slightly, Mirabella recalled James’ message on Messenger. With an airy tone, she asked, “So, how much did you buy?”

Scratching his head, Wyatt confessed, “About two hundred boxes or so. He practically emptied his stock for me.”

Hearing this, Mirabella turned her gaze towards James, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

James, who usually exuded an air of composure, now seemed slightly flustered. Clearing his throat, he deftly changed the subject. “Mirabella, what are you in the mood for tonight? Something fancy?”

With a relaxed smile, Mirabella leaned back in her seat, resting her hands behind her head. “Anything lavish will do.”

Observing her laid-back demeanor, James joked, “You’re not afraid I might trade you for a fancy dinner?”

With her eyes already half-closed, Mirabella’s response came with a touch of arrogance, “Only if you think you can.”

James chuckled, shook his head, and directed Wyatt to a specific location. As Mirabella seemed to doze off, James let the silence settle in the car, and even Wyatt instinctively turned off the music.

About thirty minutes later, they pulled up in front of a quaint restaurant nestled in a serene spot. James turned to wake Mirabella but found her eyes open, devoid of any trace of sleepiness. He raised an eyebrow, “We’re here.”

With a nonchalant “Mhm,” Mirabella pushed the car door open and stepped out.

The rustic entrance, flanked by a country-style brook and bridge décor, exuded a relaxed and refined charm. Mirabella followed James into the restaurant. The exterior had seemed modest, but inside, it opened up into an unexpectedly charming space, rich with an air of elegance.

“This place isn’t half bad,” Mirabella observed, glancing around the empty establishment. “Just a shame there’s no customers around.”

James looked back at her, explaining, “The owner has closed it to the public today.”

She raised an eyebrow, “Is the owner friend of yours?”

“Something like that,” James replied nonchalantly.

At that moment, a middle-aged man emerged from the back. Upon seeing James, his demeanor instantly shifted to one of considerable respect. "Hello, Sir."

The honorific didn't go unnoticed by Mirabella, whose eyes lingered on the man, catching the subtle deference in his gaze.

The moment the man had received the call, he knew James would be bringing a friend. But seeing that the guest was a young lady, he had visibly paused, taken aback.

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The middle aged man only gave Mirabella a cursory glance before his gaze shifted back to James, greeting him with a warm smile. "Knox was thrilled to hear about your visit. He's actually whipping up something special in the kitchen as we speak. He asked me to let you know he's perfecting a new health tonic recipe. It might take a little extra time, though, so your patience would be greatly appreciated."

James, upon hearing this, glanced at Mirabella.

Mirabella, standing nearby, caught James' inquisitive look and casually waved her hand. I'm

particularly hungry. A little wait won't hurt."

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The middle-aged man was a bit taken aback by James' manner towards the young lady by his side, but he didn't dare to pry further. Instead, he offered attentively, "I'll bring over some appetizers to tide you over in the meantime."

"Much obliged," James responded with a slight nod.

private

“My pleasure.” With that, the middle-aged man ushered James and Mirabella into a private dining room before excusing himself.

“This place is known for its food therapy. The clientele is quite exclusive, and they rarely serve walk-ins, James explained to Mirabella as they settled into their seats.

“Food therapy?” Mirabella’s interest was piqued. “You don’t find many who can whip those up these days”

James was slightly surprised to hear such a comment from Mirabella. “You seem quite familiar with food therapy?”

Mirabella shrugged, “Not really, just read a bit about them in books. Nonetheless, such culinary arts are mostly from ancient royal courts, lost in time. Even if some recipes have been passed down, they’re rarely authentic.”

She paused, “Of course, if it’s a recipe handed down through generations from a family of health tonic connoisseurs, that’s a different story.” She inadvertently let slip a little more than she intended.

James just pursed his lips and smiled at her enthusiasm.

Soon, the middle-aged man returned, carrying two delicate plates of pastries and placing them on the table.

Mirabella eyed the pastries, raising an eyebrow at one of the plates. “Is this Almond Thyme Cake?”

The man looked at Mirabella with surprise and nodded. “Indeed, it is. The combination of almond and fresh thyme is great for nourishing the body and mitigating dryness, especially around this time of year.”

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Mirabella pinched a piece, tasted it, and a hint of surprise crossed her face. “The cake melts

your mouth. The almond and fresh thyme blend is sweet without a hint of bitterness. Impressive.”

Hearing her praise, the man gestured to the other plate. “Can you guess what this pastry is?”

Instead of answering immediately, Mirabella took a piece and bit into it. Then she replied, “This is Kudzu Coconut Cake, but it’s a pity that the kudzu root and coconut powder weren’t dried enough. It lacks the intended texture and benefits.” After just one bite, Mirabella set the rest back on the plate. Her expression was tinged with disappointment.

At this, the man’s expression was beyond surprised. Such discerning taste surely belonged to a connoisseur.

“Do you have some expertise in food therapy?” he asked.

Mirabella shook her head nonchalantly. “Not really. A relative used to make them, and I’ve had a few tries.” She was practically coerced into sampling.

The man didn’t press further and soon left the private room, taking with him the plate of Kudzu Coconut Cake that Mirabella hadn’t favored.

As the middle-aged man reached the entrance, he bumped into Wyatt, who had just parked his car and returned. Seeing the pastries in his hand, Wyatt grabbed a piece and popped it into his mouth. “Not bad at all,” Wyatt commented with approval.

The man simply gave him a silent stare before turning away and walking off.

Wyatt was puzzled. Something about that look felt oddly unsettling.

The middle-aged man carried the pastries back to the kitchen, casually relaying Mirabella's critique to Knox, who was bustling around the stove. Knox's head snapped up, his expression stern "So even a non-professional can taste flaws in the pastry. You should really reflect on this and ensure you don't embarrass us again." With that, Knox returned his focus to the ingredients before him.

The man wiped the sweat from his brow, muttering to himself, "Understood." He had merely intended to point out that the young lady seemed quite discerning, but instead, he had received a scolding.

Back in the private dining room.

Mirabella had taken out a test from her bag and started working on it homework assigned by her math teacher earlier that day. James sat beside her, sipping his coffee in silence,

careful not to disturb her concentration.

Wyatt stood behind Mirabella, his gaze occasionally drifting to her paper. He couldn't make heads or tails of the math problems, but watching her swiftly and effortlessly complete one after another reminded him of his high school days when he'd breeze through exams with wild guesses.

Wyatt stroked his chin, thinking how some things never change, no matter the era – the same cavalier attitude towards schoolwork.

But he had to admit, Ms. Mirabella's handwriting was something to behold. Even when filling out random answers, she maintained a meticulous script – a sign of a calm and composed

mind.

As Mirabella wrote down the last of the equations and set her pen aside, the curtain to the private room was drawn aside. The middle-aged man who had greeted them before now entered with a tray in hand, and a faint, herbal aroma began to fill the room.

Mirabella looked up, her eyes reflecting surprise. The scent seemed familiar... wasn't it crab simmered with a delicate blend of several valuable medicinal herbs?

The man placed a dish of creamy bisque in front of her, then set down two fine porcelain bowls for Mirabella and James. “This is Knox’s latest creation, the ‘Elixir Crab Bisque. It’s prepared to strengthen the spleen and whet the appetite and is perfect for when you’re feeling a bit under the weather.”

James stood, took the bowl in front of Mirabella; and ladled some bisque into it. “Give it a try.”

Wyatt watched his boss serving someone else with a sense of surreal pleasure. If others saw. this, their jaws would surely hit the floor.

Mirabella, oblivious to Wyatt’s thoughts and not one to stand on ceremony with James, took a spoonful of the bisque and tasted it. Her eyes lit up. “This is quite good. The herbal taste

isn’t overpowering, and the flavors are balanced. The chef has a skilled hand. It’s evident that a master crafted this dish.”

James, who wasn’t well-versed in food therapy, raised an eyebrow and then helped himself to a bowl, remarking, “It’s rare to get a taste of Knox’s personal culinary work. We’re quite fortunate today.”

After finishing her serving and savoring the taste for a moment, Mirabella couldn’t help but comment, “If only you added some barley, it would be perfection.”

James might not have understood the reference to the traditional ingredients, but the middle-aged man, with a bit of knowledge about herbs, frowned slightly at her suggestion. When the young lady had commented on the pastries, he assumed she had some basic understanding, especially since the pastries weren’t Knox’s work. But this ‘Elixir Crab Bisque’ was the result of months of Knox’s meticulous research and was, as far as he was concerned, already perfect. To think this young lady still found it lacking was quite surprising.



The Mendozas have been renowned culinary herbalists for generations, with their craft honed within the royal kitchens. Their mastery of medicinal cuisine was unparalleled in the industry. So, facing critique from someone with a deep understanding of pharmacology was one thing, but from a teenager who looked barely out of high school?

The middle-aged man's expression soured. This young lady was James' guest, but her tone seemed a tad too showy, perhaps even snide.

He opened his mouth to retort when suddenly, Knox burst through the door, his face etched with a mix of shock and bewilderment. "What's the thought behind adding barley to the mix?" Knox's gaze locked onto Mirabella, a flicker of excitement barely concealed in his voice.

Mirabella turned to regard Knox, who'd just entered, noting the apron tied around his waist and the white arm gaiters that suggested he was, indeed, the chef James had mentioned. Blinking, she shifted her gaze to the steaming bowl of soup on the table, her voice light, "Barley can help balance the other herbs with the thermal properties of the crab. Barley might seem mundane compared to precious ingredients in the soup, but the art of herbal formulation is about synergy. Even the most common herb can unveil its true potential with the right combination."

As her words settled, Knox staggered, nearly losing his composure. If not for his hands braced against the table, he might have made quite the scene. The middle-aged man rushed to Knox's side, offering support, then turned back to Mirabella, unable to hide his irritation despite James' presence. "What do you know about herbal pairing, young lady?"

Taking a deep breath, the man could barely contain his frustration. "Do you have any idea how many years Knox has dedicated to studying pharmacology? The Mendoza family's expertise in medicinal cuisine is legendary, and not once has anyone dared to question Knox's methods!"

Mirabella cast him a cool glance. "If an expert in alternative medicine stood before you and made the same observations, would you then consider my words to have merit?"

Stumped by the retort, the middle-aged man stiffened. After a couple of seconds, he muttered, "You're just being unreasonable."

Sensing the conversation might devolve into an argument, Wyatt quickly interjected, “Ms. Mirabella was merely sharing her thoughts, no offense intended. Let’s not take it to heart.”

The middle-aged man huffed, “If you don’t know what you’re talking about, it’s better to say nothing at all.”

James frowned, his gaze cooling significantly as he spoke up, “Does youth preclude one from having an opinion?”

The man hadn’t expected James to defend Mirabella, and his complexion alternated between flush and pale. After a moment, considering James’ stature, he averted his gaze

and mumbled an apology. “Sorry for being too blunt.” His words carried the tone of an apology, but his demeanor suggested otherwise.

James turned to Mirabella, whose expression remained indifferent—it was impossible to tell if she was upset. However, the pleasant atmosphere had been thoroughly disrupted.

“Sorry,” he murmured to her.

Mirabella heard James’ apology, looked up, and shrugged nonchalantly. “It’s fine. Opinions vary, and not everyone is open to them.”

As Knox still seemed dazed, James stood up.

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The middle-aged man caught the expressionless look on James’ striking face as he stood up and shuddered with realization. He had been too rash, too confrontational for a moment. Crossing a young girl might slide, but crossing James... The middle-aged man couldn’t help but shiver, regretting why he had gotten into a petty argument with Mirabella in the first place

Before James could even speak, the man glanced at Mirabella and quickly followed her lead, saying, "The young lady is right. It's all a matter of personal opinion and personal taste. I apologize for my earlier tactless remarks, James. Please, don't be upset."

Mirabella sighed inwardly, noticing the man's overly cautious demeanor. It was all because she had been too slick with her words. Then, she reached for the soup spoon and brought James' bowl closer, adding another spoonful, saying casually, "Have some more soup." With that, she handed the bowl over to him.

James' gaze fell on Mirabella's face, and her pretty, almond-shaped eyes playfully blinked. Her casual demeanor somehow diffused the awkward atmosphere.

In the end, James accepted the soup she offered. Mirabella raised her eyebrows in satisfaction.

Wyatt, standing

at the side, discreetly stepped back. He thought that Mirabella really had the magic touch the tension had dissipated just like that.

The middle-aged man felt his heart relax as James took the soup. He was grateful that their exchange hadn't resulted in a blow-up.

At that moment, Knox, who had been supported by the middle-aged man, seemed to finally snap out of his daze from Mirabella's words. He stared at her with intense excitement in his eyes. "I've studied pharmacology for sixty years, yet I've been stuck in a blind spot and convinced that only culinary dishes prepared with rare medicinal ingredients could be considered true food therapy... How old-fashioned I've been," Knox said, his face flushing with embarrassment. "Young lady, thank you for your enlightening words." Then, he pushed the middle-aged man's hand away and bowed deeply to Mirabella.

The middle-aged man was shoved aside and stood petrified. His face was etched with shock as he watched Knox.

Knox was actually thanking a girl barely in her late teens. Hadn't he been rendered speechless by her just a moment ago? Now, it seemed as if he had an epiphany. He appeared not only unangered but delighted.

Mirabella herself was taken aback by Knox's sudden show of gratitude. After pausing for a second, she stood up and said calmly, "There's no need for that. I merely spoke my mind. It wasn't anything profound."

Knox glanced at the bowl of soup on the table and chuckled bitterly. "I've always felt that my new dish was missing something. I tried every fancy ingredient fit for consumption, but I

never thought of something as common as barley. You're right. The true essence of pairing ingredients in medicinal cuisine is the harmony of their properties. I've been too narrow-minded."

After speaking, Knox turned to the middle-aged man, his eyes showing a hint of disappointment and sighed, "You should offer a sincere apology to this young lady. You've been studying under me for years, yet you couldn't see through the simplest issues."

The middle-aged man, though not a direct apprentice of Knox, was talented in creating medicinal dishes. Being scolded by Knox and told to apologize to a young girl based on an offhand comment made him feel deeply frustrated. He thought Knox was making a mountain out of a molehill. Even if it was for James' sake, was there really a need to make such a fuss?

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The middle-aged man's ego was slightly bruised; nevertheless, he hastily apologized to Mirabella.

Knox observed his reluctant demeanor and waved a hand dismissively. "Why don't you have someone bring out the rest of the dishes?"

Just as the man was looking for an excuse to slip away and salvage some dignity, Knox's command gave him a quick out. "Right away."

Once he was gone, Knox turned to Mirabella and James, looking somewhat sheepish. "My associate is a bit uncultured. I apologize for the scene he caused."

Mirabella offered a gracious smile and sat back down. Knox pulled out the chair next to her and settled in. "So, young lady, how do you have such knowledge of herbal remedies?"

With Knox's question hanging in the air, James also turned his attention to her, his gaze subtly inquisitive, making it impossible for Mirabella to ignore. She glanced at Knox, her expression unfazed. "I've read a bit about health and wellness. Just the basics, really. Nothing professional."

Knox chuckled at her modesty. "If you just read a bit and are now able to spot the issues in a meal, that suggests a real talent in this field."

After a pause, as if struck by a sudden thought, Knox proposed, "Would you be interested in learning how to prepare these dishes with me?"

Wyatt, sitting nearby, looked up in surprise at Knox's offer.

The Mendoza family had been esteemed court culinary herbalists for generations. They were revered for serving kings, a testament to their lofty status.

Even in modern times, the Mendoza family was a household name in Ashford, and now Knox was a prominent member of the Pharmacists' Guild with vast connections. To be taken under the Mendoza family's wing could elevate one's experiences to a whole new level.

Moreover, Knox was known for his exacting standards. Aside from supporting two apprentices in his youth, it had been decades since he took on a new pupil. Those who caught his eye were few and far between. Indeed, James' instincts were extraordinary

"I have no interest," Mirabella flatly refused Knox's offer without hesitation. She had finally settled into a normal life; why would she torment herself with new challenges?

Wyatt coughed lightly, giving her a gentle nudge. “Ms. Mirabella, the Mendoza family has a century-old legacy in medicinal cuisine. Becoming Knox’s apprentice could pave the way for an illustrious future.”

Mirabella’s expression remained unchanged, as if the legacy of the Mendoza family was no different to her than any ordinary household. “Tempting as it sounds, I’m truly not interested.”

“Very well...” Knox sounded genuinely disappointed. After a brief pause, he offered at concession, “Should you change your mind, you’re welcome to come to me anytime.” It was a golden offer that would stun onlookers, considering Knox and Mirabella had just met.

Before Mirabella could respond, James, who had been silent at the head of the table, spoke up, “In that case, on behalf of this young lady, I extend our gratitude to you for your generous

offer.”

Knox, catching the subtle implications in James’ words, revealed a flicker of surprise. While curious about the nature of Mirabella and James’ relationship, he refrained from prying further, simply offering a smile. “You’re too polite, James. Your friends are always welcome among the Mendoza family.”

Mirabella tilted her head, casting a glance at James, her fingers tapping thoughtfully on the table, lost in contemplation.