

## The Double 171

### Chapter 171

In no time at all, the kitchen staff brought out several more dishes. Mirabella, cool as a cucumber, folded the test papers she hadn't yet managed to stash in her bag and put them away neatly.

It was then that Knox noticed Mirabella's attire, the Parkside High School uniform, and he couldn't help but express his surprise, "You're a student at Parkside High?"

Mirabella hummed in affirmation.

"Ms. Mirabella's a senior, so she doesn't have the time to be a student anywhere else," Wyatt chimed in by way of explanation.

Knox's expression cleared with understanding. "Well, that makes sense. Senior year is a real crossroads in life. It's right to focus all your energy on your studies."

After a brief pause, Knox continued, "Got a grandson in his senior year at Parkside High myself. Tried to get him interested in these healing meals, but he couldn't care less."

"Young folks tend to be restless," Wyatt said with a chuckle.

"That they do," Knox sighed, his gaze sweeping over the array of dishes before standing up and addressing James in a polite tone, "Well, I won't intrude on your meal any further."

James gave a slight nod in acknowledgment. Shortly after, Knox exited the private dining

room.

A while later, Wyatt turned his attention to Mirabella and said, "Ms. Mirabella, do you realize what a golden opportunity you just passed up?"

Mirabella raised an eyebrow, staring at Wyatt, but remained silent.

“Let me put it this way,” Wyatt began, “the Mendoza family holds considerable sway throughout Ashford. If you apprenticed with Knox, you and your family would be set for life. here. Knox isn’t just any cook. He’s a member of the Pharmacists’ Guild...” Wyatt trailed off as he remembered Mirabella’s small-town upbringing. Talking guilds might be over her head. He kept the rest of his thoughts about the Pharmacists’ Guild to himself and summarized, “In short, being connected with the Mendoza family is all pros and no cons.”

He paused, then added, “You wouldn’t have to worry about college applications either.”

“Oh,” was all Mirabella said, shrugging nonchalantly before bowing her head to continue with her meal.

Wyatt, who had been hoping to see some sign of regret from Mirabella, was left speechless. Had he not made himself clear enough? Why was Ms. Mirabella showing absolutely no reaction?

James cast a glance at Wyatt. “Eat your food.”

Wyatt touched his nose. He felt like the only one making a fuss, while the other two couldn’t

be less concerned.

After they finished eating, the group left Knox’s restaurant. But as they stepped out, a waiter hurried after them, handing Mirabella a token. “This is from Mr. Knox.”

Mirabella accepted it, opening the box to reveal a custom-made token. Upon catching a glimpse, James showed a flicker of surprise on his composed face, then spoke slowly, “Keep it. That token could come in handy.”

With a half-joking smile, Mirabella asked, “Does it get me discounts on food?”

The corner of James' mouth twitched, but he didn't bother to elaborate, "If that's how you want to see it, sure."

"Alright then," Mirabella said, pocketing the medallion before thanking the waiter, "Please convey my thanks to Knox."

Wyatt had just pulled up the car and was about to open the door for James when he overheard their nonchalant exchange. He was left utterly baffled.

A medallion gifted to Mirabella had turned into a discount card. Had they lost their minds?!

## Chapter 172

Back in the kitchen.

"Why did you give that young girl one of your tokens, Knox?" A hint of jealousy tinged the middle-aged man's words as he cast a complex glance toward Knox. He had been with Knox for over a decade and had never seen him take such an interest in someone, especially since Mirabella had turned down his offer to take her under his wing.

Knox was busy perfecting the dish that Mirabella had critiqued earlier. Without looking up from his task, he responded, "It's always good to make a new friend."

"But surely you didn't need to give her..."

The middle-aged man's sentence was cut short by Knox's interjection, "You have a narrow way of thinking. You don't know how to read people."

Knox paused, shaking his head slightly, then added, "Do you really think the Shepherd family's son is someone without knowledge?"

Despite the young lady's claims of ignorance regarding medicine, Knox was no fool. If he couldn't discern her modesty, would all his years of experience mean nothing?

The middle-aged man fell silent, conceding. There might've been some truth to Knox's words. However, he still found it hard to believe a girl of seventeen or eighteen could know

much.

With a dismissive curl of his lip, he chose not to pursue the matter further. After all... Knox was indeed getting on in years.

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Soon after, Wyatt drove Mirabella back to her neighborhood. As soon as she stepped out of the car, she ran into Delilah and Shawn, who had just returned from their new house.

Mirabella hadn't quite shut the car door when she saw them and instinctively halted. "Dad,

Mom?"

Delilah and Shawn hadn't driven today. They asked their chauffeur to drop them off at the fruit stand outside their complex, and they were still holding a bag of fruit. They were momentarily taken aback when Mirabella emerged from a sleek black sedan.

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Delilah, snapping back to reality, glanced at the black sedan. Unfortunately, with the sky darkening and the street lights offering little illumination, she couldn't make out the driver's face, only that it was a man.

"Coming back from dinner with a friend?" Delilah asked, a touch of suspicion in her voice.

Mirabella hummed in affirmation, not bothering to introduce James, instead, she thanked the person inside the car and closed the door, cutting off her parents' line of sight.

Inside the car, Wyatt, dreading the idea of Ms. Mirabella's parents meeting James, breathed a

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sigh of relief when he saw her close the door. He quickly started the engine and left the area. He didn't think James had anything to hide; he just didn't see the need for introductions.

As Delilah and Shawn watched the car speed away, Delilah finally spoke up, "Why didn't you invite your friend up for a visit?"

Mirabella was calm under the street lights, her delicate face casting a hazy beauty. She walked over and took the fruit from Delilah's hands, "It's late. It wouldn't be appropriate."

Delilah touched her nose, lowering her voice to ask, "Was it a man?"

"Yes," Mirabella replied, her gaze clear and direct. Something struck her, and she added, "He was my tutor back in the day!"

Delilah was even more surprised, "Your tutor?"

Mirabella nodded, maintaining her composure, "When I lived with Catherine, my grades weren't great. He really helped me improve."

Delilah remembered what Mirabella's school teacher had to say about her poor performance last year and quickly said, "Oh, why didn't you tell us sooner? Your grades have improved so much now, we really should thank him properly!"

Shawn, who had been quiet, looked on with an odd expression.

## Chapter 173

Mirabella's tutor had a nondescript car with an exceptionally unique license plate. This made Shawn rub his chin thoughtfully. Could Mirabella's tutor have a more intriguing background than he'd first imagined? And besides, wasn't her tutor supposedly from her hometown? What was he doing here in the city?

Delilah turned around and saw Shawn deep in thought. She playfully tapped him on the shoulder. "Shawn?"

Snapped out of his reverie, Shawn looked into Mirabella's face, about to delve into the details about this mysterious tutor. Yet, he hesitated, fearing his daughter might misinterpret his concern. He instead changed the subject. "Your mom's right. We should definitely invite your tutor over for dinner sometime."

Mirabella waved her hand dismissively with a noncommittal "Hmm," then, clutching the bag of fruit, she headed into the apartment complex.

Soon, the three of them were ascending the stairs, one after the other. Once inside, Mirabella handed the box of coffee beans James had given her to her father. "This is for you."

The coffee was exquisitely packaged in a paper wrap. Holding the package, Shawn began to unwrap it while asking, "What's this?"

"Coffee beans," Mirabella responded tersely before moving to the fridge to stow away the fruit.

Remembering how, just a few days ago, his daughter had inquired if he wanted some new coffee beans, Shawn's eyebrows shot up, and a smile spread across his face. The wrapping was now fully off.

"Ah, my dear girl. You're so thoughtful, always buying me..." He stopped short before he could finish saying 'coffee beans.' His voice seemed to hit a pause button.

Shawn had a penchant for coffee, a collector's interest even, and he could tell at a glance that the beans in his hand was a collector's item. The special seal on the outer box alone was worth a pretty penny, not to mention the ancient, yellowing seal stamp on it, indicating the rarity of the coffee beans inside.

Swallowing hard, Shawn suddenly felt apprehensive about opening the box.

Walking out of the kitchen, Mirabella noticed her dad holding the box with a peculiar expression and couldn't help but ask, "Dad, what's wrong?"

Looking up at his daughter, he pointed at the box. "This coffee..."

"Yes?" Mirabella stepped closer, her gaze falling on the coffee in his hands. "Is there something wrong with it?"

Shawn noticed her nonchalance; it was as if it were just an ordinary box of coffee beans. He touched his nose and asked in a hushed tone, "Where did you get this?"

"It wasn't bought. It was a gift from a friend."

Shawn's thoughts immediately went to the tutor who had dropped Mirabella off earlier. He drove a car with a special license plate. "Did your tutor give it to you?"

"Yeah." Mirabella didn't hide it and nodded. After a brief pause, she added, "The beans I gave you last time were also from him."

Shawn was flabbergasted. "Hold on, sweetheart, wasn't he just your former tutor? Why would he give you such expensive coffee?"

It was one thing for a student to give a teacher some gifts, but for a teacher to give it to a student... that was unfathomable.

Mirabella paused. She didn't know much about coffee or its price. When James had asked, she had merely thought of her father's fondness for coffee.

Mirabella realized this and simply said, "I had given him a box of handmade sandalwood, Maybe he found it quite useful." After all, her gifts were priceless in their own way.

Hearing his daughter's response, Shawn's lips twitched. Even the finest sandalwood could hardly

compare to the value of this box of coffee. He couldn't shake off the feeling that his daughter's tutor had ulterior motives.

## Chapter 174

Mirabella effortlessly tuned out her father's complex gaze, her mind wandering instead to the package that had been collecting dust in the cabinet for days. With a casual stride, she approached the cabinet, opened it, and retrieved the parcel. Ripping it open, she half-expected to find some sort of herbs or traditional remedy. To her surprise, it was a study guide

She had only ever shared her address with one person.

Flipping through the study guide with a look of disdain, Mirabella scoffed. Such basic material—what was that guy thinking? Was she the type to need such rudimentary aid?

With a shake of her head that conveyed her speechlessness, she stuffed the guide back into the delivery bag, ready to doom it to the trash, but just before the toss, she caught sight of the shipping label. Her hand paused.

Although there was no return address, there was a note from the courier indicating it was a local delivery. Mirabella's eyes narrowed slightly. Wasn't this from him?

After a brief moment of contemplation, she decided not to discard the study guide. Instead, she ripped off the shipping label and headed upstairs. She booted up her computer in her room, her fingers dancing



across the keyboard. In no time, using the tracking number from the label, she pinpointed the sender's location.

Aiden Gilbert?

She leans back in her chair, the flickering glow of the screen playing across her face, casting alternating shadows and light. She had only glanced briefly at the study guide's content, but it seemed relevant to the upcoming competition. So... why would that little goof send her competition material?

Was he trying to stir the pot?

Arms crossed, a playful smirk touched Mirabella's lips. She quickly shut down her computer and slipped the study guide into the bag she carried daily.

The next day..

At the Gilbert family residence!

Summer stood at the threshold, ready to head to school. She pulled open a drawer in the hall cabinet to grab her keys, inadvertently dragging out a piece of paper that fell to the floor. Her hand paused, keys in grip, as she bent down to pick up the paper, intending to stuff it back into the drawer. It was a courier slip, and upon seeing the address, she froze.

The address was all too familiar, but the recipient's name took her by surprise. It was Mirabella.

Holding the courier slip, Summer's grip tightened, recalling Aiden's arrogant demeanor from a few days ago. She couldn't help but let out a sardonic chuckle. It was typical of her darling brother to send her study guide to the person she loathed the most.

Taking a deep breath to quell the rising anger within, Summer pocketed the slip and left the house.

When Mirabella arrived at school, she had the misfortune of running into Summer, who seemed to have daggers in her eyes, as if Mirabella had stolen something precious from her. It was bizarre, but Mirabella didn't care.

The Prodigy Class and The Advanced Class were housed within the same building but on different floors. The two girls crossed paths at the school gates and quickly went their separate ways. It was as

if the other didn't exist.

Having topped the monthly exams, Mirabella was now the shining star of the class, and many classmates sought to converse with her. Yet, her cool demeanor deterred most.

persistent student approached her with a math paper, seeking help with a problem, but... they, too, were defeated by her formidable logic and clear explanations. The method was simple, but those who couldn't grasp it walked away dejected, feeling like their intelligence was on a different wavelength.

Today, Jenna hadn't shown up to school, which Mirabella found odd. During lunch, she her friend a call.

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Mirabella had tried to reach Jenna earlier, but there was no answer. Maybe Jenna was busy, or perhaps she had left her phone behind. Mirabella didn't call again but sent Jenna a text instead. It wasn't until the second period in the afternoon that Jenna finally replied. (Sorry for seeing this late. My dad's been in a car crash, and I've been taking care of him.)

After reading the message, Mirabella waited until break time and stepped out of the classroom to call Jenna again. This time, Jenna picked up quickly. Through the phone, Jenna's voice came, choked with sobs, "Mira, the doctors say my dad's really bad off. He might... he might end up in a coma..."

Holding her phone, Mirabella listened to Jenna's cries until she had poured out her fears. Mirabella asked, "Which hospital is your dad at?"

Jenna's voice was on the edge of breaking as she gave the details. Just then, the bell rang for class. Mirabella was brief, "Don't be too down, Jenna. Your dad's going to pull through. I'll come by after school. Got to go. Class is starting." She hung up and returned to the classroom with a thoughtful look.

Jenna put away her phone and managed a wry smile, looking over at her mother, who had been standing outside the ICU, rooted to the spot. She desperately wished for her dad's recovery, but the doctor's words had shattered all hope for her and her mother.

After school, Mirabella hailed a cab straight to the hospital. She found Jenna sitting outside the hospital room, looking pale and drained, her eyes red and swollen. It seemed that Jenna's gaze only focused when Mirabella appeared. "Mira, you came."

"Yeah." Mirabella reached out instinctively to pat Jenna's head, then asked, "So, tell me what's going on with your dad."

Jenna looked into Mirabella's bright eyes, finding some comfort in them. While clutching Mirabella's hand, she started to recount what the doctors had said about her father's

condition.

Mirabella listened, her expression easing somewhat. The situation didn't seem as dire as she had feared.

That was when Kayla, Jenna's mother, approached. Upon seeing her daughter talking to a tall, slender girl about her husband's injuries, she swallowed her sadness and interrupted, "Jenna, maybe ease up a bit. Don't make your friend upset, too."

Then, turning to Mirabella, Kayla paused, recognizing the girl her daughter often raved about at home, the one she called Queen Mira. Her husband had even jokingly suggested inviting Mira over sometime. The thought of her husband made Kayla's throat tighten, but she managed a polite smile. "I'm sorry, Jenna is just too upset. Thank you for coming to see her dad."

After a brief pause, she added, "We can't really visit him in the ICU right now, but I appreciate you making the trip."

Mirabella nodded in understanding. "I'm sorry. I'm sure he'll get better."

Kayla felt tears welling up again. She didn't want to break down in front of the kids, so she simply said. "You two chat. I'll leave you be,"

With that, she walked away, her steps heavy with concern.

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Mirabella withdrew her gaze and settled down beside Jenna. She was never one to mince words or spin fancy phrases for comfort, so she said simply, "Your dad will wake up."

Jenna's lips twisted into a bitter smile. "I hope for a miracle."

Mirabeila patted her shoulder with earnest assurance, "Believe me, miracles do happen."

Looking into Mirabella's eyes, Jenna felt a strange sense of calm wash over her. "I don't know why, but even though you're not a doctor, your words are weirdly comforting."

Raising an eyebrow with a hint of a smile, Mirabella replied, "Jenna, that gut feeling of yours is spot on."

Clearing her throat, Mirabella continued, "Your dad's condition... is like when the body takes a huge hit and goes into this sort of hibernation mode to heal. Once he's patched up inside and out, we'll find some way to jolt his nerves awake. It's just a matter of time."

Jenna was momentarily stunned. She didn't quite grasp the whole 'hibernation' concept, but the promise of awakening was like a beacon in the dark, igniting hope within her.

However, her hope dimmed as quickly as it had appeared. Even Dr. Ray had said the chances were slim. And Mira... she wasn't a doctor, was she? Perhaps those comforting words were just that empty comfort.

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"Thank you," Jenna managed to say. It was all she could find words for.

Mirabella, sensing Jenna's mood, didn't press further. After spending a little more time at the hospital, she stood to leave. Before exiting, she turned to Jenna, "When your dad moves out of the ICU and into a regular room, I'll come visit him then."

Assuming it was just a polite show of concern between classmates, Jenna didn't object and absentmindedly murmured her agreement before escorting Mirabella out.

As soon as Mirabella stepped out of the hospital, she hailed a cab for home. As she settled in the backseat, boredom set in, and her thoughts turned to Zach. She fished out her phone and shot him a message on Messenger, [Zach, you done with work? When are you flying back?]

Zach was just boarding his flight, about to switch off his phone, when he got his sister's message. He quickly replied, [ have a layover in Lakewood. Should land around nine tonight. You picking me up, Mira?]

Mirabella ruthlessly shot down the idea, [Nah, gotta hit the books tonight.]

Zach felt a pang of hurt. Was his sister's homework really more important than him? With a sigh, he texted back, [Alright, just wait for us at home then.]

The word 'us' caught Mirabella's attention, and she probed, [Not flying solo?]

Zach responded, [Nope, Leo's with me.]

Mirabella pondered for a mere two seconds before firing back, [OK, landing at nine, right? I'll be at the arrivals gate.]

Zach was taken aback by the sudden turnaround in her response and glanced at the figure next to him, half-hidden under a baseball cap and a face mask. Zach couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy. So, was the sudden change of heart because Leo was coming as well?

Feeling an inexplicable chill, Leo looked at Zach quizzically, "Zach?"

Zach just huffed and turned away.

Leo was left puzzled.

## Chapter 177

Just past nine o'clock, the plane finally touched down at Ashford Airport.

Jet-lagged from the long haul flight back from the States, with a layover in Lakewood, Zach felt like he had run a marathon. The hours up in the sky had taken their toll, and he was drained. But the thought of his sister waiting for him injected him with a second wind. As soon as he disembarked, he was off like a shot, his suitcase wheels barely touching the ground, leaving Leo and Collins trailing behind..

Collins watched Zach's figure speed away and muttered under his breath, impressed by his stamina. He urged Leo to pick up the pace before chasing after Zach, calling out, "Hey Zach, hold up, man!"

Instead of slowing down, Zach quickened his step. Collins was flabbergasted, then turned to Leo and whispered, "Is it just me, or is Zach acting a bit off?"

Leo looked ahead at Zach, his expression a mix of concern and amusement. Weird was an understatement. The entire flight had felt like a rollercoaster, complete with unexpected chills that seemed to emanate from Zach. "Maybe he's just homesick," Leo finally said after a thoughtful pause.

Collins, keeping his eyes on the fast-moving Zach, had to agree. After all, no one knows you better than your own brother.

But soon, the homesick Zach slowed down and waited for the two to catch up. Then he asked, "Hey Leo, you guys are using the VIP exit at the airport, right?" He cleverly didn't mention that Mirabella would be there to pick him up.

Leo, about to explain that there were no fans aware of their itinerary and that they could just use the regular exit, was cut off by Zach's hasty suggestion.

"Let's just meet up at home then. It'll save us the hassle of waiting around and bumping into your fans," Zach said, adjusting his glasses, feigning concern for Leo's convenience.

Collins chuckled and joined in, "Why don't you just use the VIP exit with us, Zach?"

Zach choked on his response, realizing his oversight. That wasn't an option. Mirabella was waiting at the arrivals gate, but Zach didn't want Leo tagging along.

He cleared his throat and waved dismissively at Collins, "No worries, it's not necessary.

"It's no trouble at all, man. The VIP exit is twice as fast as the regular one," Collins interjected. Zach was internally screaming. Was Collins a professional at ruining plans?

He paused, and then Collins added, "Besides, the company car is already waiting in the parking lot."

The resentment behind Zach's lenses was almost palpable. Why hadn't he just sprinted away from them earlier? Why did he have to shoot himself in the foot?

Taking a deep breath, Zach, trying to keep his cool, insisted, "It's okay. My driver is right outside waiting."

His “driver,” standing inconspicuously at the arrivals gate, was none other than Mirabella, who was surely raising an eyebrow at this point.

Hearing this, Collins’ expression showed a flash of understanding, and he didn’t press the issue. After a brief moment, he turned to Leo, “Why don’t you just ride back with Zach then? Fans won’t recognize you in that disguise, and you can slip through the regular exit unnoticed.”

Zach was internally facepalming. Seriously? Was that an option now?

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After delivering that line, Collins could swear he felt a chill in the air, a vibe that spelled trouble. He glanced up instinctively at Zach, only to be met with an innocuous smile as gentle as a lamb’s. Shaking off the strange feeling, Collins chalked it up to jet lag. His senses must’ve been playing tricks on him after such a long flight.

Zach, on the other hand, let out a silent sigh. His scheme to put one over on his little brother had gone awry. Disheartened, he made his way towards the exit of the arrival hall. The way he walked, you’d think he was attending a funeral.

Soon enough, the trio made it out of the terminal. The crowd at the pickup area was sizeable, so Collins, ever the vigilant manager, positioned himself right beside Leo, ready to shield him from any recognizing glances.

As they emerged, Zach had entertained the notion of letting the cat out of the bag about his youngest brother, but seeing the throng of people waiting outside, he found himself instinctively taking a protective position on the flank, keeping curious eyes at bay.

Mirabella stood at the back of the crowd, half-concealed by a black mask. Spotting Zach and Leo, she waved casually over the heads of the bystanders.

Having not spent more than a few hours with Mirabella, Leo didn’t recognize her immediately, especially with the mask in place. It wasn’t until he saw Zach stride over and stand before her that Leo’s eyes widened in recognition.



“Have you been waiting long?” Zach asked Mirabella, his voice unexpectedly tender, a stark contrast to his typical brusqueness with his brothers.

“Not really,” Mirabella replied, her lips curving into a small smile. She then turned her attention to Leo, decked out in his incognito get-up, and greeted him with a nod, “Hey, Leo.”

Leo’s bright eyes, peering out from under his baseball cap, still held a trace of surprise. Snapping out of it, he acknowledged her with a soft “hm” before instinctively looking to Zach for an explanation.

Zach, anticipating the awkward moment, had already shifted his gaze away, feigning indifference.

“Oh, hey, aren’t you Mirabella? Remember me?” Collins broke the ice with a warm greeting, recognizing her despite the mask.

Mirabella nodded politely, “Hello, Mr. Collins.”

Surprised, Collins’ face lit up. “You remembered my name. You’ve got a good memory.” He recalled barely interacting with her for five minutes during his brief visit to the Davis household.

Mirabella just smiled, unbothered.

Catching Collins’ exaggerated reaction from the corner of his eye, Zach rolled his own.

Mirabella was a brainiac, and remembering a name was child’s play for her.

Clearing his throat, Zach interjected, “Let’s get moving. The airport’s crowded. We can talk at home.” With that, he took the lead, striding towards the main entrance.

But as he reached the doors, he saw the stream of cars pulling away, leaving a gaping void in the lane where their ride should have been. It dawned on him that no driver was waiting for

them.

Zach was dumbstruck. Turning back, he was met with Leo and Collins, both staring at him as if to say, “Where’s the car?”

The embarrassment was palpable.

Collins was the first to regain his composure. He fished out his phone and said, “I’ll have my assistant bring the car around.”

Zach massaged his temples. Today had to be the most colossal screw-up of his life.

Once Collins finished his call and returned, he glanced between a flustered Zach and the composed Mirabella. He couldn’t help but recall Zach’s earlier refusal to use the VIP exit and

his eager attempts to ditch them. A smirk twitched at the corner of Collins’ lips.

It seemed Collins had stumbled upon a revelation.

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Before long, Leo’s minivan rolled up to the curb. Spacious enough for a small crowd, it easily accommodated everyone.

Mirabella hopped in first while Zach and Collins stowed the luggage at the back. Leo hesitated for a moment before climbing aboard, sliding into the seat right beside Mirabella.

Zach, returning from the trunk, caught sight of Mirabella, with Leo now occupying the prime spot next to her. He shot Leo a sidelong glance.

Jeez, what a sneaky guy!

A bewildered Leo, on the receiving end of an unexpected glare, thought, “What the...?”

Collins had witnessed the whole exchange. He shook his head and settled into the

passenger seat.

The vehicle soon left the airport, cruising towards the Davis family’s suburban enclave. Once inside, Leo removed his mask. He was known for his cool demeanor and wasn’t much of a talker. His previous encounter with Mirabella had been brief, just a dinner, but his first impression wasn’t too shabby!

Now, his hands rested on his knees, fingers idly caressing the fabric of his jeans. His peripheral vision occasionally caught Mirabella’s presence. He wanted to strike up a conversation but couldn’t quite find the words.

Zach, meanwhile, wasn’t in the mood for chit–chat either. Having been abroad for days, he had a backlog of company matters to sort through and was busy texting his assistant.

Mirabella felt Leo’s stealthy glances and let her eyelids droop slightly before casually turning to look at him. She noticed his pallor, which hinted at a certain unwellness, a touch of sickness perhaps?

Her brow furrowed as her gaze accidentally swept over his hand resting on his knee. The faded needle marks were still discernible.

After pondering for a few seconds, Mirabella asked nonchalantly, “Have you been shooting overseas lately?”

Leo turned to Mirabella, unsure how she knew about his travels–Zach had probably

mentioned it.

Regaining composure, Leo pressed his lips into a stiff smile that softened his usually distant expression. He nodded and replied, "Yeah."

"You don't look too well," Mirabella observed with a composed facade. "Are you sick?"

At her words, Leo's fingers involuntarily clenched, and his expression froze for a moment. That's when Zach chimed in from the backseat, "He's just worn out from a long flight, that's

all."

Leo relaxed his hand. He didn't want the family to know about his health issues.

"Oh, then make sure you rest up when we get home. Health comes first," Mirabella said, dropping her gaze, seemingly convinced.

"Yeah, I'm aware. Leo's voice was dry as he responded, and then he turned to gaze out the window, where the streetlights flickered and danced on the glass.

After a good fifty minutes, they finally arrived at the entrance of their complex. Collins and the assistant took off after unloading the luggage.

Just as Leo reached for his suitcase, Mirabella's hand brushed his wrist in a seemingly

'accidental' gesture, "Let me help with that, Leo."

Leo paused, taken aback. Mirabella quickly let go and grabbed the suitcase handle, taking it from him without further ado. The whole interaction lasted but a few seconds.

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Leo snapped back to reality and chuckled as he saw Mirabella striding ahead with his suitcase. "Thanks, Mirabella, but I could've handled it myself."

Mirabella didn't reply and just continued on, pulling his luggage determinedly. Sensing her insistence, Leo eventually gave up trying to help.

Zach, who had been entirely overlooked behind them, now stood with hands on hips, watching the two disappear into the distance. He glanced at his own suitcase by his feet and felt utterly neglected.

Wasn't he also family? Didn't he have luggage too?!

Zach stood there for what felt like an eternity. As the figures of his siblings faded, neither of them looked back to notice him being left behind. Finally, he huffed and dragged his suitcase toward the apartment complex alone.

Ungrateful siblings!

Delilah and Shawn only knew about Leo and Zach's return through Mirabella, so they stayed home waiting.

As the front door opened, Delilah reached out to help with the luggage and asked, "Leo, your must be exhausted, huh?"

Leo shook his head and nodded a greeting. "Hey, Dad. Mom."

"Haven't eaten yet? I saved you and your sister some dinner," Delilah offered with concern.

Just reaching the doorway, Zach thought, "You and your sister?" Was he invisible?

After a night of repeated blows to his ego, Zach began to question his very presence in the family. Fortunately, he wasn't entirely neglected. Shawn chimed in, "Zach, why are your zoning out in the

doorway?” He gave Zach a puzzled look that clearly questioned his mental sharpness at such a young age.

Zach just sighed internally. Maybe it was time to find a new place to call home.

Delilah was preoccupied with Leo’s gaunt face, feeling a pang of maternal heartache that pulled her attention away from Zach. She ushered Leo into the living room for a closer look and said, “You look pale. You haven’t been resting properly, have you?”

She had been worried since his last visit, and after discussing it with Collins, who assured her there was nothing to worry about, Delilah hadn’t probed further.

Leo’s eyes drooped slightly as he replied, “It’s just jet lag. I’ll be fine tomorrow.”

Mirabella, who had been observing quietly, remembered checking Leo’s pulse earlier, and her expression tightened slightly. Her brother might’ve been physically weakened, but there was

something else in his pulse that troubled her.

After a moment, Mirabella excused herself, “I’m heading to my room. Still got some

homework to finish.”

“Oh, okay,” Delilah nodded but quickly added, “Did you have dinner yet, sweetheart?”

Mirabella affirmed with a nod, “I did.” With that, she gave a slight bow and headed upstairs.

Delilah turned back to Leo, lamenting, “Your sister is so into her studies. It’s all books and homework with her, like a little nerd. She doesn’t have any fun.”

Leo, looking towards the second floor, felt a little surprised. He hadn't expected Mirabella to be such a bookworm. But then again, maybe growing up in a small town had fueled her fervent pursuit of knowledge. At that moment, his appreciation for his studious little sister soared.

Mirabella, now labeled as diligent and hardworking, returned to her room and sat down at her desk, booting up her computer.