

The Double 221

Chapter 221

Mr. Hammond's face was impassive. His features were set in an expression that conveyed no sympathy for Madeline's pleas. "Everyone has to pay for their mistakes," he intoned. His voice was devoid of warmth. "You should have thought about the consequences when you decided to act."

Madeline's face was ashen, and she dissolved into tears once more..

Anthony, standing to the side, could only shake his head in a mix of frustration and resignation. "Hindsight is 20/20, as they say. You'd best head back to class. As for your punishment, we'll discuss it thoroughly before making a decision."

Before long. Madeline shuffled out of the office. Her figure was a portrait of dejection.

Watching her retreating back, Anthony sighed, "If only she'd put as much effort into her studies as she did into causing trouble and smearing her classmate."

Mr. Hammond remained silent. His demeanor was unreadable.

It wasn't long before Summer arrived at the office.

On her way there, her mind had raced through various excuses, and despite her inner turmoil, it was the message from Colton that finally steadied her nerves. So when she stepped into the office, her face was composed, and she nodded politely at Mr. Hammond and the other teachers, as if she wasn't at the heart of the storm.

Mr. Hammond caught one glimpse of Summer and immediately noticed the depth of her composure; in such a situation, her calm was indeed remarkable.

"Why did you incite Madeline to target Mirabella online?" This time, it was Mr. Hammond who broke the silence, not Morgan.

Summer faced Mr. Hammond. His authoritative presence commanded her respect. She clenched her hands at her sides before responding coolly, "I must admit, I'm at fault here. Mirabella is a foster child of the Gilbert family. She asked my dad to pull some strings at the education association to get her hands on some review material, which he then sent to her."

"I simply didn't agree with this unfair advantage over other students and mentioned it to Madeline in passing. I had no idea she would take it upon herself to defend my honor and post it on the forum." A wistful smile touched Summer's lips as she bowed deeply to Mr. Hammond and the other teachers. "I'm sorry. Please be lenient with Madeline. This whole issue started because of me, and I'm willing to take full responsibility for my indiscretion."

Her apology seemed incredibly sincere.

Those who made it into the Prodigy Class were undeniably brilliant, and Summer's rapid academic improvement over the past six months had not gone unnoticed by Morgan. Seeing her take responsibility touched him somewhat. Thus, Morgan looked to Mr. Hammond, and despite the blow to his own pride, he spoke up for Summer.

"Though Summer may have erred, the blame cannot wholly rest on her shoulders. She did mention that Mirabella was once a foster child of the Gilberts. Although the competition material was voluntarily turned in by Mirabella, that doesn't prove anything. Moreover..."

Morgan paused, turning back to Summer. "You said it was Mirabella who asked your father to obtain the competition material, correct?"

Summer met his gaze steadily, without hesitation, and nodded. "To clarify everything, I called my father. He should be arriving at the school soon. He can explain everything."

Morgan had been left in an embarrassing position the previous day because of the competition material Mr. Hammond had presented. Now, hearing Summer's words, a flicker of hope sparked within him. That burning desire to know that he hadn't wrongfully accused a student surged within him.

Mr. Hammond's gaze flickered with a hint of something different upon hearing Summer's explanation. His mouth curled into a half-smile before he turned and walked to the window, standing with his hands clasped behind his back.

"I'm rather curious to know what your father would have to say about all this," he remarked with a detached tone.

Summer watched Mr. Hammond's silhouette against the window, with a flicker of unease stirring in her heart. Yet, recalling her father's reassuring text message, she allowed herself to

relax.

Morgan considered for a moment before suggesting. "Should we invite Miss Mirabella to join us? To clarify things face-to-face?"

To have her witness how her foster family slandered her?

Mr. Hammond didn't turn around. His gaze was fixed outside, and his voice was resolute. "No need."

Relief loosened Summer's tense grip upon hearing his words.

It wasn't long before Colton arrived at the school, stepping into the office with a genial smile on his broad, square-jawed face. "Apologies for the delay. Got caught in a bit of a traffic snarl."

Summer opened her mouth to speak, but Colton shot her a glance, signaling her to bide her time. He was no stranger to Mr. Hammond, so he addressed him directly. His voice was laden with regret. "Mr. Hammond, I'm truly sorry for the commotion caused by my foster daughter at the school. The truth of the matter is..."

Colton's version echoed Summer's, but his words carried an air of authenticity, especially when he touched upon Mirabella's academic performance, emphasizing her struggles. "To be frank, my foster daughter's grades were at the bottom of the barrel back in our hometown. But now, she insists on

joining this national competition. I as a father made the grave mistake of helping her cheat,” Colton said, shaking his head in feigned remorse.

Mr. Hammond studied Colton, with a barely perceptible sneer playing at the corners of his mouth. Just as Colton was gearing up to add more, Mr. Hammond interjected. “Are you suggesting Miss Mirabella is a poor student?”

Caught off guard, Colton nodded, “Indeed, I won’t lie – she barely got accepted into the county high school after a lot of... effort on our part.”

The implication of “effort” was clear to any discerning ear it hinted at monetary influence.

Morgan, initially hoping to validate his fair treatment of students through Colton’s words, found himself frowning deeper with each passing moment. Cheating in a competition was one thing, but bragging about bribing one’s way into high school was quite another.

Summer, observing the peculiar expressions on both Mr. Hammond and Morgan’s faces,

immediately realized her father had misspoken. She hadn’t mentioned to him Mirabella’s repeated academic triumphs.

About to speak up, Summer was cut off by Mr. Hammond’s voice, “How fortunate then, for I too put considerable effort into recruiting Miss Mirabella into Parkside High School.”

Colton’s face was a picture of bewilderment. “But, but how can that be? You’re not joking. Mr. Hammond? My foster daughter’s grades...”

Parkside High School was no ordinary institution – a prestigious school ranked within the top five nationally, with an admission of only the elite among elites. Now Mr. Hammond was claiming he personally went to great lengths to enroll his foster daughter there? The notion seemed fantastical utterly nonsensical to Colton, and he felt his world spin. He might not have paid much attention to her academics, but he knew the extent of her capabilities.

Mr. Hammond's laughter held a tinge of derision. His authoritative demeanor was now tinged with sarcasm. "Are you implying, Mr. Colton, that I, the principal of Parkside High School, lack the basic ability to judge talent?"

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Colton's body jolted, and he unconsciously pinched his hand, offering a strained smile. "You've got it all wrong, sir. I didn't mean it that way."

Mr. Hammond's eyes held little warmth as he reached for a stack of exam papers and a report card on his desk, handing them to Colton. "Do me a favor, Mr. Colton, and take a look. Does this look like poor performance to you?"

Colton's gaze landed on the papers Mr. Hammond passed to him, hesitating for only a second before taking them.

The papers were the monthly exams for various subjects, along with the perfect score set Mirabella had completed online before entering Parkside High School. They were all printed

out.

The report card summarized cumulative scores for each term, and the name topping the list for several terms was unmistakably Mirabella.

Colton stared at the bright red perfect scores and rankings on the papers. His face was etched with disbelief. He flipped through them again and again as if to ensure he wasn't seeing things. "Do you really think someone with these grades needs to cheat with some shoddy review materials?" Mr. Hammond's lips curled with a touch of sarcasm.

"This...this can't be right. Her grades weren't like this," Colton muttered, shaking his head in denial. Even if his foster daughter had improved, it was unthinkable for her to skyrocket to the top of the class.

Sensing his skepticism, Mr. Hammond picked up another set of photocopied papers from his desk. "Here, take a look at these as well." They were the photocopies of the current term's

competition papers.

"Mr. Colton might not quite understand them, but no matter, you can have your friends at the Education Association compare them. See if the way Mirabella answered the questions matches the methods in your competition materials."

Mr. Hammond's voice was calm, but his presence was commanding. Even his most understated remarks carried a sharp edge.

Colton had planned to push all the blame onto his

foster daughter upon arriving at the school. After all, the Gilbert family had raised her for seventeen years. A little hardship could be considered repayment for their kindness, and he could always compensate her later with

money.

Compared to his own daughter's future, he naturally didn't want her to have any blemishes. Looking at the papers in his hand, Colton felt uneasy. He truly hadn't expected his foster daughter's academic performance to improve so dramatically, nor did she seem to have

gained Mr. Hammond's favor...

"Still planning to put all the blame on Miss Mirabella?" Mr. Hammond sneered, not in the mood to smooth things over. Mirabella was his recruit, so he would not tolerate any further attempts to tarnish her reputation.

Colton was now in a tough spot. He had made the accusation, so retracting it would be tantamount to slapping his own face.

Pressing his temples, Colton looked towards Mr. Hammond and was about to speak when Mr. Hammond's phone rang from his pocket. It caused him to abruptly close his mouth.

Mr. Hammond pulled out his phone, glanced at the caller ID, and after a moment of hesitation, walked over to the window to answer. It was a call from the head office of the Education Association.

Two minutes later," Alright, I understand."

After hanging up, Mr. Hammond's gaze grew darker. He turned back to Colton and said firmly. "The matter of the leaked competition materials ends here."

Colton exhaled a sigh of relief upon hearing this. He had called an old friend, the chairman of the Education Association, before coming. It seemed that the call was likely from his friend.

Mr. Hammond watched Colton visibly relax, and his lips twisted coldly. "However, Summer's national competition eligibility is hereby revoked."

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As Mr. Hammond finished speaking, Summer's eyes snapped open in disbelief, as if she couldn't fathom such a development.

Colton was also stunned for a moment before snapping back to reality, frowning as he said, "On what grounds are you cancelling my daughter's national competition eligibility? She hasn't done anything wrong!"

Mr. Hammond let out a cold chuckle, "Why her eligibility is being cancelled is something we all understand very well. If I were to pursue the matter of the leaked competition materials, do you really think your daughter would get off with just a cancellation?"

Putting aside the fact that Summer, as an up-and-coming starlet in the entertainment industry, couldn't afford a scandal, the issue of the Education Association leaking confidential competition materials, if made public, could force even the national education authorities to step in and take action.

Colton suddenly felt a cold sweat drench his back.

“I accept the punishment.” Before Colton could speak, Summer, who had been standing by, spoke up. Though she was uncomfortable with the situation, this outcome was the best under the circumstances. Even if she continued in the national competition, she would be just making up the numbers, so why should she waste more time on it?

Colton glanced at his daughter and ultimately said nothing more.

Morgan, standing to the side, let out a self-deprecating laugh. He would probably never be able to hold his head high in front of Mr. Hammond again.

After leaving the office, Summer walked Colton out of the school.

“Why haven’t you ever mentioned Mirabella’s grades to me all this time?” Colton asked heavily as they walked.

Summer pinched her hand and replied softly, “I’m not familiar with her.”

Colton stopped in his tracks and turned around with an expressionless face. “Do you really take me for a fool?”

With things having escalated to this point, it would be foolish not to see the underlying reasons if he hadn’t lived these years in vain.

Summer met Colton’s dark eyes, and her face instantly paled. “...”

“Being so impatient, you’ll hardly make it big.” Colton said coldly, dropping the words as he left. She’d hardly make it big?

Summer watched her father's retreating figure, with a slight twist on her lips. If it hadn't been for Alden secretly sending the materials to Mirabella, would today's events even happen?

Around noon, Mirabella paid a visit to Mr. Hammond's office.

"Are you sure you want to keep up this guilty facade?" Mirabella sat in the chair, somewhat amused as she looked at Mr. Hammond. He had been in this state for a solid five minutes.

Mr. Hammond coughed and finally spoke, "It was I who brought you into Parkside High School, and yet it has led to you being slandered and doubted time and again."

Mirabella arched an eyebrow. Her hand casually rested on the arm of the chair. "Excellence always breeds jealousy. There's no need for you to blame yourself."

Mr. Hammond heard this, and his lips twitched. He fell silent for a moment and then sighed lightly. "I haven't realized you had some history with the Gilbert family." He didn't mention the more delicate matter of the Gilbert family's adopted daughter.

Mirabella pursed her lips. Her demeanor was nonchalant. She simply said, "My last name is Davids now."

With that statement, she distanced herself from any relation to the Gilbert family.

"No matter what, you've been wronged in this affair," Mr. Hammond said with a wry smile.

The Gilberts had risen from new money to the helm of Gilbert Enterprises, securing their place among the city's elite families. Their connections were obviously strong, which was why the competition material incident had been so easily glossed over.

Although Mr. Hammond wanted to defend Mirabella, getting on the wrong side of the education association wasn't beneficial for her. After all, the Davis family was just an ordinary household, without the means or power to fight against those wealthy dynasties.

He didn't want to see such a promising talent get suppressed and ruined by those in higher places. After weighing his options, compromise was the only choice, even if it was reluctant.

Chapter 225

Mr. Hammond's face suddenly took on a serious cast as a thought struck him. "If you ever run into trouble you can't handle, feel free to come see me. I've got a fair number of friends around

here."

Had anyone familiar with Mr. Hammond been present, they would have been astounded.

Mr. Hammond was a native of Riverdale, and with the Hammond family name behind him. The Hammonds might not have been the *crème de la crème*, but they were still blue-bloods through and through. Truth be told, the Gilberts didn't hold a candle to the Hammonds. His offer was tantamount to bringing Mirabella under the wing of the Hammonds themselves.

Mirabella offered a smile, although she didn't need his help. She replied with a sweet. "Thank you, Mr. Hammond. I appreciate it."

Mr. Hammond felt a tinge of sentimentality, and thinking of Summer, he couldn't help but add some advice, "Sometimes, being too naive isn't good. It's important to keep your guard up."

Mirabella looked up at Mr. Hammond and, seeing his earnest expression, she touched her nose, thinking. "Well, looks like my goody-two-shoes act is quite convincing."

"With the nationals coming up next week, make sure you're ready. We're all counting on you to shine at the international competition," Mr. Hammond reminded her.

Should Mirabella score well internationally, it would catapult her career to new heights, and she wouldn't have to entertain any more slander or compromise from her foster father. In a world where power and strength reigned supreme, only by standing tall could one avoid being wronged at every turn.

Oblivious to Mr. Hammond's thoughts, Mirabella threw up an "OK" sign. "Don't worry. I'll bring home that international trophy for you."

After a pause, she added, "But I won't actually be able to hand it over to you." It was, after all, meant for her dear Catherine.

Mr. Hammond's lips twitched. He knew she had a competitive streak, and not wanting to dampen her spirits, he simply warned, "The international competition is a different ballgame. It's filled with top contenders."

Mirabella's eyebrows shot up, and her voice was laced with pride, "That's what makes it exciting."

Just then, a knock came at the door, and Mirabella stood. "You must be busy. I'll head back to class."

Mr. Hammond rose as well. "Alright then."

Mirabella reached the door and pulled it open to find Anthony, with two familiar faces in tow. Mirabella was rather surprised at the sight of them.

"Ms. Mirabella." Wyatt greeted her, with a touch of respect in his voice.

James looked at Mirabella. His expression was thoughtful. "Did we interrupt your conversation with Mr. Hammond?"

Stepping out of the office. Mirabella replied casually, "Not at all, we were just wrapping up."

James hummed softly. His usually stoic face softened slightly.

Anthony, taken aback, whispered, "You two know each other?"

Wyatt nodded, "Ms. Mirabella is a friend of our... James".

Mr. Hammond, overhearing this, was visibly stunned. His student knew James of the Shepherd. family? And Wyatt's demeanor towards her was quite respectful, which was truly a puzzling revelation.

Mirabella nodded to James and Wyatt, not lingering to chat, and with a quick "I'll be off then," to the still shell-shocked Mr. Hammond, she made her exit.

"Alright... alright," Mr. Hammond managed. His head still spun as he ushered James into his office with newfound reverence.

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Mr. Hammond pulled out his prized coffee from the cabinet and brewed it before settling into his armchair, looking towards James. "How long are you planning to stick around these parts, James?"

James lifted the teacup, blew gently on the surface, and took a sip. "No immediate plans to head back."

At that, Mr. Hammond couldn't help but chuckle, "Donald gave me a ring just the other day."

The mention of Donald made Wyatt, who stood behind James, visibly squirm with guilt.

"He's got too much time on his hands," James said nonchalantly, reclining on the couch with an air of effortless nobility.

Mr. Hammond's lips twitched. In all of Riverdale, probably only James could make such a remark about Donald. He recalled his earlier conversation with Mirabella, and the curiosity got the better of him. "You seem to be quite familiar with our school's student, Mirabella."

James nodded lightly. "Yeah, I spent some time living next door to her place."

Next door?

Mr. Hammond stroked his chin, perplexed. Wasn't Mirabella just an ordinary student? How on earth did she end up living next to someone like James?

"Did she come to see you about something?" Inquired James, pretending not to notice his confusion.

That reminded Mr. Hammond of the unpleasant encounter with the Gilbert family that morning, and he casually brought up how Mirabella was slandered for cheating in the competition.

After hearing the story, James remained cool and detached, merely tilting his head with a hint of amusement. "So the education association enjoys a bit of backstage manipulation these days?"

Sipping his tea, Mr. Hammond sighed cynically. "There are plenty in the association who look for shortcuts. It's become the norm."

After a pause, he changed the subject, "I'll be heading back to Riverdale next week. Got anything you want me to deliver to Donald?"

James' gaze seemed distant, almost nonchalant. "No need. I'll be making a trip back myself next week.

This surprised Mr. Hammond.

"The historical museum is releasing a 17th Century emerald pendant for exhibition," James said softly.

Mr. Hammond's eyes widened in shock. "Donald's actually putting that emerald pendant on

display? Is he trying to cause a stir in the industry?"

The pendant from the Shepherd family was nearly flawless. Many had eyed it covetously, but none who tried to acquire it met with good ends.

“So your trip back is to personally oversee the antiques in the exhibition hall?” Mr. Hammond quickly grasped the situation.

The biennial exhibition featured rare artifacts from all around, hosted by the Shepherd family. No one else had the clout to ensure the highest security.

Despite the stringent security, there were always loopholes. Mr. Hammond seemed to recall an incident from two years ago and guessed Donald’s intention for displaying the Western Zhou Dynasty Jade. “Are you planning to draw them out with the pendant as bait?”

James’ eyes were half-closed. His gaze was intense and cool. “Nobody can meddle on Shepherd family turf and escape unscathed.”

Mr. Hammond felt a shiver run down his spine. Despite being older by a few decades, he couldn’t withstand the chilling aura emanating from James.

Steadying his nerves, he shifted the conversation, “When are you heading back to the capital?”

‘Next Friday,’ replied James. His eyes were now free of the cold glint, and his demeanor was jeeringly harmless – as if the earlier menace were but an illusion.

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Mr. Hammond couldn’t help but chuckle, “As it happens, I’m a Friday regular too.”

James glanced his way. “How about I get Wyatt to swing by and pick you up?”

Waving his hand, Mr. Hammond demurred, “No need to trouble yourselves. I’ve got a few students to shepherd as well.”

James arched an eyebrow. “Oh, they’re competing?”

“Yeah, but how’d you know?” Mr. Hammond was genuinely surprised.

James smiled. “Heard a little birdie mention it a couple of days ago.”

So that was it.

Without pressing further, Mr. Hammond shifted the conversation to other matters.

After leaving Mr. Hammond’s office, Mirabella made a beeline for the classroom. As for why James had been there, she didn’t bother to speculate.

“Mr. Hammond summoned you again? What did he want?” Jenna leaned in with curiosity as soon as Mirabella settled into her seat.

Fishing out a copy of a French anthology from her desk, Mirabella flipped it open and without looking up, replied, “Nationals next week. He just wanted to remind me to hit the books.”

Jenna rested her chin on her hand. “That’s it? Nothing else?”

“Nope.” Mirabella didn’t even glance up.

Blinking, Jenna’s gaze landed on the French tome that her friend was pondering. She tried to make sense of a line and instantly felt her head spin. Despite her confidence in her French, she couldn’t decipher a single word.

“But if you’re supposed to be studying, why are you digging into this book?” Jenna asked, puzzled.

Mirabella turned another page, and her voice was even. “Oh, I signed up for a French speaking contest too.”

Jenna touched her nose. “A French speaking contest? How come you decided to join that?”

She was well aware of the competition. Their French teacher had brought it up in class, but at the time no one had volunteered.

This wasn't just any French speaking contest. It wasn't about rote memorization of French passages. It involved grammar, fluidity, and you couldn't bring any notes onstage. It was akin to impromptu speaking. Actually, it was even harder than that, since you had to translate French thoughts into English on the fly.

"The winner gets a hundred thousand in scholarship money." Mirabella stated seriously. Who could turn down money?

Jenna remembered the days when Mirabella was daily "blessed" with someone's generous transfers. Her emotions were mixed. After a while, she managed to ask, "Excuse me, but are you in need of money?"

Hearing this, Mirabella paused. Her hand rested on the French text. She turned to Jenna, nodding solemnly. "Does anyone ever think they have too much money?"

Jenna's eyebrow twitched. Damn it, how could such a soul-searching question leave her speechless?

Mirabella smiled slightly. Just as she was about to turn back, she suddenly faced Jenna again. "By the way, do you follow any celebrities?"

"Uh?" The subject changed so quickly, so Jenna was momentarily taken aback. Then she nodded, "Of course, I'm a fan. Why do you ask all of a sudden?"

She remembered Mirabella previously mentioning she wasn't interested in celebrities.

Mirabella paused thoughtfully for a moment before asking. "Ever heard of a singer named Leo?" "Leo? A singer?" Jenna shook her head. "Nope, doesn't ring a bell."

“Alright, just curious,” Mirabella said, with a tinge of disappointment in her voice as she turned back to her book.

After a moment’s contemplation, it was clear to her that her Leo was indeed not one of the famous ones.

Jenna watched Queen Mira return to her reading, puzzled. Mirabella didn’t come across as someone who’d idly pry into others’ business, so who exactly was this Leo character?

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Jenna scratched her head and pulled out her phone, opening the browser. “Queen Mira, that Leo you just mentioned, which ‘Leo’ is it?”

“L–E–O.” Mirabella replied without looking up.

Jenna typed the name “Leo” into the search bar, but none of the results matched the singer Queen Mira was talking about. So, she put down her phone and said, “Is this Leo someone you know personally? I couldn’t find him online just now.”

“Hmm, probably not very famous,” Mirabella responded offhandedly.

Hearing this, Jenna remarked, “You know, there are a lot of cover artists out there with amazing voices. They might not be well-known, but their talent is on par with the pros.”

She assumed Mirabella was talking about an undiscovered cover artist.

Meanwhile, the aforementioned cover artist Leo, who lacked fame, suddenly sneezed.

“Caught a cold from all that comfy home–rest, huh?” Collins glanced at Leo while holding some paperwork.

Too comfy? Leo rubbed his itchy nose, feeling a mix of emotions. The constant nagging at home from his parents was hardly comforting.

“Here’s a contract for a reality show live broadcast. Take a look.” Collins handed the paperwork to Leo.

After a pause, he added, “I think this show is perfect for you. It could dispel the company’s concerns about your health and give you a break from touring.”

Leo’s expression darkened, and without much interest, he tossed the contract onto the coffee table. “You know I never do these kinds of reality shows.”

Seeing Leo’s stubborn attitude, Collins massaged his temples in frustration. “Do you even know who’s directing this show?”

Leo looked away, uninterested.

“It’s the industry’s reality show genius, Walker. Every show he produces is a hit. People are clamoring to get on his shows, and he’s personally inviting you. But you’re telling me you’re not interested?”

At this point, Collins was itching to crack open his artist’s head to see what was going on inside.

“With my current condition, even if I join, it would be a half-hearted effort,” Leo said, obviously annoyed.

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“your condition? Aside from avoiding intense physical activity, you’re perfectly fine. You’ve been resting at home for days, and your face has even gotten chubby,” Collins retorted, dismissing Leo’s objections.

Touching his face self-consciously, Leo fell silent.

“Either way, you have to take this gig. No discussion,” Collins said firmly, making the decision.

Leo might not be aware of Walker’s reputation as a top-tier producer, but Collins was, and he was not going to let Leo’s temperament get in the way this time.

Leo looked up at Collins. “Is it a mäst?”

“Yes, I’ve never forced you to join these kinds of shows before, but this time it’s different. Your need to listen to me.”

After a moment’s silence, Leo finally signed the contract.

Relieved, Collins quickly secured the document, fearing Leo might change his mind. “By the way, the show requires you to bring a family member as your partner, but if there’s no one suitable, a friend will do. I remember your friend Summer gained some popularity after that Celebrity Boot Camp. You could bring her along.”

It made sense to choose someone from the entertainment industry for such shows, to boost.

ownership and create buzz. So, when Collins brought the reality show contract, he had already considered who would be the best choice for Leo.

Leo's brow furrowed instinctively at Collins' mention of Summer. Without a moment's hesitation, he replied, "No need."

Collins paused, his expression turning to one of confusion as he took in Leo's sudden sour mood. "Uh, you're not planning to bring Summer along?"

"I'm not close with her." Leo said, his voice a mix of cool detachment.

Collins couldn't help but think it odd. Summer had grown up with Leo, but they weren't close. Who was he kidding?

After a moment's thought, Collins decided not to push the topic and switched gears. "So, who are you thinking of bringing? Someone from the band? Or maybe an artist from the company?"

Leo suddenly looked at Collins with an expression that bordered on incredulous. "Didn't you say it had to be a family member?" he asked. Mirabella was also his sister.

"Yeah, that's right." Collins nodded, his eyes suddenly widening as a thought struck him. "You're not thinking of inviting Zach, are you?!"

"Zach's a well-known lawyer in the industry. Sure, he's not as high-profile as those in showbiz. but he does pop up in magazines from time to time. Teaming up with Zach... that could be an interesting choice."

Collins crossed his arms, his analysis sound. But then his gaze shifted, skeptical. "But considering how much Zach seems to dislike you, I doubt he'd join a variety show."

Leo's expression darkened. "Who said anything about inviting Zach?"

"Uh... you are bringing Emmitt?" Collins blinked, thinking that possibility even less likely.

"My sister," Leo paused, then clarified. "My actual sister."

At that, Collins slapped his forehead in realization. "Right, of course! How could I forget about your little sis? If you bring her to the show, man, she'll be a dazzling highlight."

The siblings' good looks alone would crush the competition. The more Collins thought about it.

the more excited he became.

Leo shot him a look. "Don't get ahead of yourself. She's a high school senior; she might not have the time."

"Don't worry about that. The show's still in the planning stages. Since it will be live, I'm guessing it will be on weekends. It won't interfere with her studies."

"She might not want to join."

"That's easy. Just give me her number, and I'll take care of it." Collins was already pulling out his phone as he spoke.

Leo watched his manager's movements but didn't bother to look up his sister's contact info. After pursing his lips thoughtfully, he finally spoke, "Never mind, I'll talk to her myself."

Collins pocketed his phone without further insistence. "Alright, it's settled then. If there's a snag..."

Leo cut him off before he could finish, "I'm her brother. I can handle it."

Confident in his client's determination, Collins said no more and soon left the Davis family home with the contract in hand.

Leaning back on the sofa, Leo pondered for a moment before grabbing his phone and opening Messenger. He sent a message to his sister. [Hey, sis, can you do me a little favor?]

Mirabella wasn't in class yet and replied promptly. [What's up?]

Leo sat up, his fingers flying across the screen as he typed out a message, only to delete it. feeling it wasn't quite right. He composed and erased several drafts before settling on one to send.

Mirabella saw the 'typing...' indicator persisting for minutes on end and finally sent back a question mark in confusion.

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Mirabella propped her chin in her hand, waiting with the patience of a saint until finally, her phone pinged with Leo's reply.

Leo: [Suddenly remembered I have nothing urgent to say.]

That was it? After all that typing?

Mirabella sent back a question mark.

Leo: [Aren't you about to head to class? I won't keep you any longer.]

Mirabella put her phone away but couldn't shake the feeling that Leo was being unusually dodgy today.

After school, Mirabella hadn't even reached the gates when her phone buzzed in her pocket. She pulled it out. It was Leo calling.

She quickly hit the answer button, "...I'll be out in two minutes."

"Is someone from your family picking you up today?" Jenna asked casually as they walked together.

Mirabetta tucked her phone back into her coat pocket. "Yeah, my brother."

At that, Jenna glanced at Mirabella's breathtaking profile and couldn't help but stroke her chin. "Then he must be quite the looker, too!"

Mirabella raised an eyebrow, giving her a sidelong glance. "Naturally." With that, she continued forward.

Jenna blinked, suddenly feeling slighted. Was she being teased for not having a brother?

Hurrying to catch up. Jenna was curious to see what Mirabella's brother looked like.

Soon, they stepped out of the school. Jenna scanned the area, and when her eyes landed on a figure wrapped up tight from head to toe at the curb, she couldn't help but tsk. "People these days really have some bizarre fashion sense."

Mirabella looked over, her lips twitching slightly.

"Queen Mira, where's your bro?" Jenna prodded.

With a resigned tilt of her chin, Mirabella's gaze landed on Jenna's so-called 'bizarre' figure. Following Mirabella's gaze, Jenna's mouth dropped open like she was catching flies. It took her a moment to stutter out, "No way... that's your brother?"

How could Mira, the epitome of finesse have such an eccentric brother? Something seemed

Mirabella cleared her throat. Leo wasn't famous, but she couldn't let his high-profile disguise be mocked. She approached Leo and casually threw back at Jenna, "Yep, that's my bro."

Jenna was gobsmacked. Awkward. Driven by curiosity, she followed.

“Leo.” Mirabella called softly as she neared.

Leo, absorbed in his phone, looked up instinctively at the sound of his sister’s voice. “You were quick.”

His face was shielded with the essential sunglasses and mask. After speaking, he adjusted the sunglasses on his nose.

“Yeah.” Mirabella nodded.

Then Leo’s attention shifted to Jenna, pausing briefly before asking politely. “Is this your classmate?”

“Yeah, my friend, Jenna,” Mirabella introduced succinctly.

Given that his sister was introducing a classmate, Leo figured she must’ve been a good friend. He took off his sunglasses, revealing deep, alluring eyes that sparkled like stars, and nodded slightly at Jenna. “Hello.”

Leo had that cool aura about him that made an impression even when only his eyes and forehead were visible.

Jenna nearly gaped, but regaining her composure, she nodded shyly and spoke in a hushed voice, “Hi, hi there!”

Goodness, this was no eccentric; he was downright enchanting. No wonder he was so covered

1. up.

But somehow, Mira’s brother looked familiar to Jenna. Had she seen him somewhere before? She scratched her head, trying to place him, but the memory eluded her.