

The Double 261

Chapter 261

Mirabella sighed silently to herself before sending a unified response to both Zach and Leo. [Got it, you big bables.]

When Zach and Leo received this reply, they both felt like they had been somewhat insulted.

Mirabella pocketed her phone and was about to look up when a motorcycle suddenly sped towards them from a distance. Her brows furrowed slightly as she prepared to pull James to safety, but he had already taken the initiative, yanking her aside just in time.

The screech of tires tore through the air as they struggled to regain their balance, and the force from James sent Mirabella stumbling a couple of steps further. Lifting her gaze, she saw the motorcycle on its side, and its wheel was still spinning. The rider, apparently eager to avoid blame, scrambled up, muttered a quick apology, and sped off as quickly as they had arrived.

The whole incident, from the crash to the rider's departure, lasted less than three minutes. Mirabella narrowed her eyes; this didn't seem like an accident.

"Are you okay?" James asked. The concern was evident in his voice. He had been steadying her by the shoulder, but as he spoke, he slowly let go, creating a little distance between them.

Mirabella, unfazed, noticed the scrape marks on James' pant leg. The fabric wasn't torn, but the impact had been anything but gentle.

"You're going to need to get that leg checked out," she started to say, but was interrupted by the sound of an approaching car.

Wyatt, who had witnessed the near-miss with the motorcycle, felt a tightness in his chest. He parked the car hastily and approached with urgency. "Sir... James, are you hurt? It's my fault for parking too

far away. I was delayed in traffic."

Wyatt's eyes were fixed on James' leg, and his face was etched with guilt. He should've stayed closer to James.

Although James was pale, his demeanor remained calm. "It's nothing," he said dismissively, ignoring Wyatt's concern.

Instead, he turned to Mirabella. "Let's get you back to the hotel."

Wyatt's eyes widened, and his expression turned stern. "No, we should have it checked first."

James frowned at the objection.

Mirabella paused for a few seconds before speaking up. "You really should get it checked. The force of that crash wasn't trivial. There might not be any visible wounds, but it could have caused bone damage."

Wyatt, relieved that Mirabella agreed, nodded vigorously. "Ms. Mirabella is right."

He hesitated, fearing James might insist on his original plan, then said to Mirabella, "I'm sorry."

Ms. Mirabella. I'll arrange for someone to take you back to the hotel."

James gave Wyatt a cold look, which made Wyatt avert his gaze. He knew it was a sign of his displeasure. Despite that, he couldn't risk James' safety.

Turning away, Wyatt made a quick call to one of his men, giving low instructions.

Soon after, a sleek black sedan pulled up. Mirabella was momentarily taken aback but quickly collected her thoughts and stepped into the car. Before she did, she said to Wyatt, "Let me know if there's any problem."

Wyatt assumed Mirabella was simply concerned about James' health and wanted to be updated on the medical examination. He nodded to her without giving it much thought.

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When Mirabella got back to the hotel, it was already half-past nine, and Anthony had called her twice during the drive.

The first call was to share the thrilling news that she'd aced the preliminaries and had secured a spot in the final round.

The second was a gentle reminder for her to stay safe: not to linger outside too late and to head back to the hotel early to rest up and be on top form for tomorrow's showdown.

Mirabella reassured him time and again that she was fine, and it was only after her repeated assurances that Anthony finally stopped calling.

After returning to her room, Mirabella picked out some fresh clothes and took a quick, refreshing shower. Once she was done, she collapsed onto the bed. Her eyes fixated on the ceiling, and the evening's harrowing near-miss replayed in her mind.

She had noticed the motorcycle earlier. At first, it seemed to be barreling straight towards her. but as it drew closer, particularly when James pulled her to safety, she saw the rider swerve slightly. So... if her hunch was right, the real target of the motorcycle might actually have been James, and the rider was someone with some serious skills – a fact they tried to disguise, but which she had spotted instantly.

Mirabella rolled over, draping her leg over the top of the covers, feeling exhausted yet restless. Even if she had been the intended target, she was confident in her ability to dodge the threat.

On the other side of town, as Wyatt was heading back from the night market, he called Curtis, instructing him to have a doctor waiting at the mansion.

Upon learning that his boss had been sideswiped by a motorcycle, Curtis immediately whipped out his laptop to pull up surveillance footage from several streets around the night market. It didn't take long for him to discover that the footage from the crucial time had been tampered with, and the traces had been expertly erased.

Curtis let out a cold smile, and his fingers danced across the keyboard. The black interfaces popped up on the screen, displaying rapidly changing data. Within a minute, the wiped surveillance data was restored. Zooming in on the footage, Curtis scrutinized how the motorcyclist had charged towards James. However, due to the angle of the cameras, Curtis could only see the motorcycle heading straight for the girl next to his boss, not realizing that the actual objective was James.

With each replay, every time he saw the bike, seemingly targeting Mirabella, only for his boss to get hit while protecting her, Curtis' face grew darker. At that moment, his opinion of Mirabella couldn't have sunk any lower. If it hadn't been for her, James might not have been injured. If she hadn't invited him out late at night, would any of this have happened?

Taking a deep breath, Curtis quickly captured a screenshot of the motorcyclist and sent it to his men.

Regardless of why this person targeted a young woman and went to great lengths to erase the footage, the fact remained that their boss had been hit. He wouldn't allow anyone to act so brazenly in Riverdale.

A short while later, James and Wyatt arrived back at the mansion where several family physicians had hurried over. After a round of examinations, each one of them let out a sigh of relief.

"Thank goodness it's just a few scrapes and bruises," Wyatt said, wiping his forehead. His were filled with relief and a tinge of fear.

James shot Wyatt a frosty glance. Feeling the chill from that look, Wyatt shrank back slightly.

"Look, James, let me explain... At that moment, I was just worried that the incident might trigger your old injury, so I chose not to consider dropping Ms. Mirabella off at the hotel first. After all, that motorcycle had a clear objective."

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James rose to his feet. His face was an unreadable mask as he ascended the staircase, Wyatt watched his boss disappear, with panic setting in. He slumped against the armrest of the couch, muttering, "This is it. I'm done for. I feel like I'm about to be exiled to the frontier."

Curtis noticed Wyatt's look of despair and frowned, especially after hearing him earlier. emphasize that "James. Ignoring his own wounds, Insisted on escorting Ms. Mirabella back to her hotel first.

"The surveillance footage from the night market was tampered with, but I've managed to restore it. From the angle, it's clear the target wasn't the boss. It was Ms. Mirabella," Curtis stated icily.

Wyatt's head snapped up in surprise. "No way, Ms. Mirabella's just a regular student. Why would anyone target her? Besides, this is her first time in Riverdale."

Unconvinced by his disbelief, Curtis opened the surveillance video on his laptop and 'slowed it down. "Take a look."

After the section showing the collision was played, Curtis added, "The assailant's objective was crystal clear: Ms. Mirabella. And judging by his moves, he's had some training. He tried to cover his tracks, but he left plenty of slip-ups."

Wyatt scratched his head, still struggling to digest the revelation. "I just can't see it being Ms. Mirabella."

Curtis felt like smacking some sense into Wyatt, who seemed bewitched by that girl. Taking a deep breath to calm his irritation, Curtis asked patiently. "You think it's impossible, yet the evidence suggests otherwise. How much do you really know about Ms. Mirabella?"

"..." Wyatt started to respond.

But Curtis cut him off, pressing on, "Okay, so you say she's just a regular student. But why. would a so-called regular student be targeted by someone with dubious intentions? Have you really thought about that?"

Wyatt touched his nose and murmured, "That's because she's with the boss."

"Are you letting a single box of incense cloud your judgment of her?" Curtis shook his head, exasperated.

Sure, the Incense of Calm was priceless, but considering James' stature, was he really someone to be swayed by such a trifle?

"It's not about blind trust. Besides, I checked her background. She's just a girl raised by her grandma in the countryside, innocent and unblemished except for a melodramatic family history," Wyatt insisted, speaking from his gut feelings.

Sometimes he found Mirabella mysterious, like where she got the incense or how she suddenly turned her poor academic record around and became the talk of the school. But none of that

seemed to point to her being problematic.

"Forget it, I might as well be talking to a wall. Just... try to be more vigilant." Curtis advised and closed his laptop, standing up to leave.

Wyatt touched his nose again, perplexed. Curtis had seemed to take a liking to Ms. Mirabella, so why the sudden suspicion because of tonight's events? Even Nikolai and Knox, who were shrewd old foxes,

wanted to take her as a student. She couldn't be someone with ulterior

motives.

Plus, Mr. Hammond from Parkside High School had nothing but praise for her. She's a top student, and she might come from a humble background, but to the average Joe, she was a rising star with limitless potential.

Shaking his head, Wyatt decided not to dwell on Curtis' thoughts. Instead, he pulled out his phone and sent Mirabella a text.

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Wyatt had snagged Mirabella's number a while back when he had to dig up some info on her. Thanks to the whole Incense of Calm flasco, he had made sure to save it in his contacts,

[Ms. Mirabella, James is just a bit scratched up, nothing serious. You can relax.]

After sending the text, he waited for a moment for a reply, but when none came, he pocketed his phone, yawned, and strolled outside the villa.

The next day dawned.

Mirabella was up with the larks, but it was still early, and she didn't feel like getting out of bed just yet. Snuggled in her comforter, she reached under her pillow for her phone, tapped it to life, and saw the message from Wyatt from last night.

Good to know all was well. She replied with a brief "Got It" to Wyatt.

With the phone in her hand, Mirabella scrolled through her Messenger group chats. Then something seemed to jog her memory, and she exited Messenger to open her browser. She typed in "Riverdale Antiques Exhibition".

Instantly, a myriad of search results popped up, with the chatter mostly centered around the emerald pendant featured at the exhibition.

“Emerald pendant?” Mirabella pondered. Her finger caressed the phone screen.

She recalled a reminder from Cool Autumn Breeze.

With Riverdale being so tight on security, and yet all this info spilling out over the net, especially about the pendant, it felt like a breadcrumb trail left on purpose.

A playful smirk crossed Mirabella’s lips as she checked the exhibition dates. It was a two–day affair, having started yesterday, and her flight back to Ashford was at seven tonight. Since she was here, skipping out on a little recon felt like a missed opportunity. And she hadn’t yet laid eyes on the emerald pendant.

Thinking it over, Mirabella sprang out of bed with newfound energy and fired up her laptop.

A flurry of keystrokes later, and her screen went dark – a canvas of black against which strings of cryptic characters danced swiftly.

Thirty seconds in, and instead of darkness, her screen now showed multiple live feeds. One mini– screen was unmistakably marked with “National Antiquities Museum.”

Her gaze never strayed from the screen, and her fingers tapped a rhythm on the keyboard. Two minutes later, she killed the program and wiped her browsing history clean.

Stretching, Mirabella stood, headed to the bathroom for a quick freshen up, pocketed her phone, and left her room.

In the second–floor dining area, Mirabella had just picked out her breakfast when her eyes caught Vincent sitting by the window. He had sheets of paper in front of him and was deeply engrossed in writing something.

For a moment, Mirabella considered her approach. Then, with the plate in her hand, she made her way over and sat opposite him. It was only then she saw he was working on the last physics problem from

yesterday's prelims. Without interrupting his train of thought, she began nibbling on her breakfast sandwich.

Five minutes later, Vincent seemed to realize someone was across from him. He looked up to find Mirabella leisurely enjoying her meal and did a double-take.

Noticing the dark circles under his eyes and the distinct redness in them, Mirabella couldn't help but ask, "You didn't pull an all-nighter, did you?" The boy looked like he'd been cramming books non-stop.

Vincent's voice was rough, and he reached for his water glass, taking a long drink before replying hoarsely. "No, just woke up really early."

Mirabella's eyebrows twitched involuntarily. Well, you don't look 'early riser' fresh to me.

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Vincent didn't write anymore. He gathered the papers from his desk with a sigh, finally admitting defeat with a voice tinged with resignation. "You're really good, you know."

He had once thought he could beat her, only to find she was playing in an entirely different league. A wry smile flickered across Vincent's lips. No wonder she never seemed to take his challenges seriously.

That was the difference.

Mirabella cleared her throat. "You know, you're actually quite amazing."

Hearing her, Vincent just glanced at her and said. "You're mistaken if you think I'm looking for comfort. I'm just stating the facts."

Mirabella took a sip of her soup. Her voice was muffled. "Yes, I am better than you. Does that sound less like comfort to you?" She had pegged him as a typical straight-shooter from the

start.

Vincent pursed his lips, saying nothing, observing Mirabella quietly for a while before he finally spoke up. "Even though I admit you're better, I'm not giving up on the idea of surpassing you."

Mirabella nodded, offering encouragement, "Keep at it!"

After finishing her soup, Mirabella wiped her mouth with a napkin and glanced at the papers on the table, asking. "Still haven't cracked it?"

Vincent didn't respond.

Mirabella nodded knowingly, picked up the paper, and immediately spotted the error in the equations at a glance. Taking up the pen, she said, "Your approach using the Navier–Stokes equations isn't wrong, but it unnecessarily complicates things. This step here is superfluous..."

Five minutes later, Mirabella put down her pen and slid her corrected equations across the table to Vincent. The errors she had pinpointed echoed in Vincent's ears, and as his eyes settled on the paper, the equations seemed to come to life, suddenly clarifying in his mind. A problem that had seemed insurmountable was now simple, thanks to her insight.

By the time Vincent looked up, Mirabella had already left her seat. He picked up the paper with the equations, his previous frustration from a fruitless night of study washed away. Sometimes, all it takes is one piece of the puzzle to see the whole picture.

Mirabella was more than just strong.

Nine o'clock sharp.

The twenty-three students who had advanced to the national finals from across the country

were already seated in the examination hall. All the advancing students were gathered in the same room, and this time Mirabella was seated in the front row. Her position was a testament to her top score from the day before. Her solitary figure in the front row seemed to already be ensconced on the champion's throne, eliciting awe from all her peers.

This was a real-life demonstration of overwhelming strength.

Soon, the proctor walked in with the examinations, distributed them, and signaled the start.

Three hours on the clock.

The finals were bound to be a step up in difficulty from the prelims, mirroring the challenges of the previous year's international competitions. Even Mirabella looked serious when she received her paper, indicating the difficulty of the challenge ahead.

During those three hours, the only sound in the examination hall was the rustling of papers as pencils flew across them.

Unlike the day before, Mirabella didn't turn in her paper early.

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The three-hour exam felt like an eternity for the teachers who were keeping watch, yet for the students, whose pencils scratched furiously across their papers, the time slipped away like sand through their fingers.

As the final bell tolled, signaling the end of this domestic competition, it drew a temporary close to the intense phase of academic rivalry. Regardless of whether they clinched a spot in the top five, these twenty-some students had all but secured their future at Prestige College. It was a testament to their strength and growth.

They had hit the books day and night in preparation, and yet, the conclusion brought with it a hollow feeling. Stepping out of the exam room, many were moved to tears by the weight of the moment.

Mirabella had just descended the stairs when she spotted Mr. Hammond and Anthony waving. at her from a distance. She hesitated for a beat before making her way over to them.

“Mirabella, how did you feel this time?” Mr. Hammond’s voice betrayed a hint of anxiety as he posed the question.

Anthony swallowed hard, anticipating her response.

Mirabella, noticing their anxious expressions, couldn’t help but quirk a half–smile. “I guess it went okay,” she replied with a modest shrug.

At this, Mr. Hammond and Anthony exchanged a silent glance, and then in unison they demanded, “What do you mean by ‘guess’?”

Touching her nose self–consciously, Mirabella murmured, “Not entirely sure if I aced it?”

Uncertainty implied possibility, and with that-

Mr. Hammond and Anthony was stunned. They should’ve known better than to ask this big shot how she felt about the exam.

Vincent, descending the stairs himself, couldn’t escape the fate of being summoned by Mr. Hammond and Anthony’s eager gestures.

Clearing his throat and pushing down the heartache Mirabella’s words had induced, Mr. Hammond turned to Vincent with a benign smile. “Vincent, how did you feel this time?”

The script was the same.

After a brief silence, Vincent glanced at Mirabella before replying, "I think it went fairly well." His answer, mirroring Mirabella's, prompted Mr. Hammond and Anthony to immediately adopt a stern demeanor. "Speak plainly!" Their responses were frustratingly cryptic.

Feeling unnerved by their intense expressions, Vincent clarified, "I mean... second place should be safe, right?"

Mr. Hammond and Anthony were silent. Here it was again. These students must have rehearsed their nonchalance together.

Unaware of their inner turmoil, Vincent turned to Mirabella. "I solved the last problem using the method you showed me this morning."

Mirabella arched an eyebrow, gave it some thought, and then nodded. "That should work. Many ways lead to Rome. The equations change, but the solutions are often variations on a theme."

"Right, then I'm pretty confident about securing second place." Vincent said, nodding seriously. Mr. Hammond and Anthony exchanged another glance. Their "sorry to intrude" sentiment grew stronger by the minute.

Glancing at his watch, Vincent asked Mirabella, "My cousin invited me to check out Prestige College. Fancy joining us? I've heard the cafeteria there serves food that's legendary."

Mirabella was about to decline when she heard Vincent mention the renowned cuisine of Prestige College's cafeteria. Her eyes lit up instantly, and she nodded. "Your cousin is too kind."

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Vincent was genuinely surprised when Mirabella accepted his invitation, especially since she had coldly turned him down just the day before. After a brief pause, he suggested. "It's about lunchtime. How about we head over now?"

"Sure." Mirabella nodded in agreement.

They both gave a quick nod to Mr. Hammond and Anthony and made their exit.

It wasn't until the pair had gone that Mr. Hammond and Anthony snapped out of their daze. "When did Vincent get so chummy with Mirabella?" Anthony stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Just the other day. I heard some kids saying Vincent challenged her right outside her classroom."

Anthony paused for a moment, and then his eyes suddenly widened as a thought struck him. "You don't think they're secretly dating, do you?"

Campus tales of foes turning into lovers weren't uncommon, after all. That would be quite the scandal.

Mr. Hammond listened as Anthony's speculations grew wilder and couldn't help but grimace, fixing his gaze on Anthony's shiny dome, "Ever wonder how you—got that bald spot?"

Anthony instinctively rubbed his bald head, feeling unfairly targeted. How did a simple chat turn into a curse on his receding hairline?

"Look, Vincent's eyes were clearly filled with admiration. You get it? Admiration!" Mr. Hammond shook his head in disgust and walked away.

After walking a considerable distance, Mr. Hammond suddenly paused, feeling like he had forgotten something. Shrugging it off, he squinted his eyes and decided not to dwell on it. heading towards the main gates of Prestige College.

The cafeteria at Prestige College was spacious, with an inviting atmosphere, a wide array of dishes, and flavors that could rival any downtown diner.

Mirabella had thought the canteen back at Parkside High School was top-notch, but sitting in Prestige College's dining hall and sampling their fare was an eye-opener.

Vincent's cousin, Matthew, was a sophomore in the Physics Department, known for his academic prowess. He was good-looking, with delicate features and a pair of black-framed glasses perched on his nose, and exuded a warm and friendly vibe. He too had been following the competition and looked at Mirabella with evident respect.

After lunch, Matthew took Mirabella and Vincent on a tour around the Prestige College campus, sharing bits of the institution's history along the way.

Since the sprawling campus had several distinct areas, Matthew led them straight to his own

department, the Physics Research Institute.

"By the way, Freshman Mirabella, what major do you plan to pursue?" Knowing she was bound to be a student at Prestige College, Matthew casually addressed her as a freshman.

After a moment's thought, Mirabella replied, "I'm leaning towards Biology, but Physics and Chemistry are also on the table."

Vincent was taken aback by her answer. With her clear strengths in Physics and Chemistry, it was unexpected that she would opt for Biology.

Matthew adjusted his glasses and suggested, "Actually, the Physics Department isn't a bad choice either. It's not as monotonous as the Biology Department with its constant experiments. and data analysis."

The Physics Department students were a rare breed in Prestige College, partly because their professors were notoriously selective. But Matthew felt compelled to recruit such a talented prospect into his department, especially when she was such an attractive girl.

Pausing briefly before Mirabella could respond, Matthew continued, "Come on, let me take you guys to the lab and show you around."

Mirabella glanced at her watch and nodded, following Matthew's lead.

The lab was on the third floor of the institute. Arriving at the elevator, Matthew flashed his ID card hanging from his neck, and with a soft ding, the doors slid open.

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Once inside the elevator, Matthew swiped his card again and hit the button for the third floor. "It's a pity today's the weekend. If it were Monday, you could have witnessed a physics experiment in action."

As he spoke, the elevator dinged at their floor.

Matthew stepped out first, pointing out various areas designated for different experiments and which places were off-limits, treating Mirabella and his cousin as if they were already part of the physics department's future.

Matthew led them down the corridor, and then they stopped at the third classroom. At the door, Matthew swiped his card again, and the glass doors swung open automatically.

"This is where we have our lab classes," Matthew said, standing at the doorway and gesturing at the equipment inside. He didn't invite them in for a tour.

.After about ten minutes of peeking into the lab areas, the trio headed downstairs.

While they walked, Matthew continued his pitch, encouraging Mirabella to choose their physics department. Midway through, they saw a group of professors from various departments at Prestige College heading their way.

Immediately, Matthew pulled the two to the side. His demeanor instantly became reverent. "Listen up," he whispered with a hint of awe in his voice, "those are the big shots of Prestige College, the top-tier professors. When they walk by, keep your heads down and stay quiet." Even though there wasn't an explicit rule against bringing high school students to the labs, it wasn't exactly smiled upon by the faculty.

Mirabella obediently positioned herself behind Matthew and bowed her head.

As the Prestige College professors approached, a palpable aura of authority wafted over. Matthew's palms were sweaty as he tensely greeted them, "Good day, Professors!"

The head of the physics department glanced over at Matthew's group. Since Mirabella and Vincent both had their heads down, their faces weren't clear, and they were presumed to be students. The professor gave a casual wave of the hand and continued on to the research building.

However, one of the professors trailing behind paused right in front of Matthew. Matthew's body tensed, and he

autiously looked up to see Professor Wade from the biology department staring intently at Mirabella, who was behind him. Instinctively, he wanted to step in front of her to shield her. Professor Wade's halt caused the other professors to stop and turn their heads in curiosity.

With sweat beading on his forehead, Matthew was frozen in place, stammering. "Professor Wade... this is my cousin and his friend. They're here for a competition, and I... I just brought them to... to take a look..." Matthew was so nervous he barely knew what he was saying.

Vincent, seeing his cousin's anxiety, realized the gravity of the professors' status and felt at pang of guilt. He shouldn't have let Matthew bring them here. If Matthew got into trouble for this, it would be on him.

While Vincent and Matthew were visibly tense, Mirabella seemed unfazed by the professors' presence. She had been keeping her head down all this time, but then she noticed the persistent gaze of Professor Wade. After a moment of contemplation, she slowly lifted her head to meet his eyes.

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Mirabella's mind worked swiftly as she connected the dots between the man standing before her and the professor she had encountered a while back in Mr. Hammond's office. Wade was distinguished honorary member of the National Education Association and a seasoned professor of biology at Prestige College.

With a subtle composure, Mirabella nodded gracefully at him. “Professor Wade, good to see you.”

Wade met Mirabella’s calm gaze and gave a nod. A rare trace of warmth softened his usually stern features. “Ah, I thought you looked familiar. It’s Mirabella, isn’t it?”

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As Professor Wade’s gentle words filled the air, Matthew’s expression shifted from apprehension to surprise. He had braced himself for a rebuke, never expecting Professor Wade to be acquainted with the girl.

And now, seeing the professor’s demeanor, which could only be described as amiable, was a shock. Some of his peers were double-majoring with the biology department, and they often likened attending Professor Wade’s lectures to an expedition to the Arctic – frigid and severe.

Mirabella’s lips curved into a faint smile. She glanced at Matthew, who stood before her, then said sweetly, “I just finished an exam and bumped into Matthew from the physics department. Curiosity got the better of me, so I tagged along for a look around.”

At her words, Wade let out a drawn-out “Oh,” then added, “No harm in that, scouting the place early.” He paused, then with a hint of frustration, added, “Why didn’t you swing by my biology institute?”

Was it that old rascal Hammond playing his games again?

Mirabella paused, momentarily taken aback. She was just an ordinary high school senior yet to sit her finals. Could she really just wander into the biology department at Prestige College?

Wade quipped with a hint of mischief, “Didn’t Mr. Hammond tell you anything?”

Mirabella recalled that after her exam, Mr. Hammond had only asked about her performance and said nothing more. She shook her head in response.

Wade, feeling somewhat snubbed, huffed quietly. So, Hammond had steered her towards the physics department instead of his own? It seemed their decades-long camaraderie had reached its limits.

Meanwhile, Mr. Hammond, who was just about to head to his hotel after a satisfying meal, suddenly sneezed violently. He rubbed his nose, suspecting someone was speaking ill of him.

“Hey, you two aren’t my physics students, are you?” The physics professor, who had walked some distance away, noticed Wade chatting with the students and circled back. His gaze landed on Mirabella and Vincent as he inquired.

Already dealing with one professor, and now with his own from the physics department coming

back into the picture. Matthew felt like breaking down in tears. Trembling, he explained. “Profe – Professor, they’re high school seniors here for the BrainSpark Nationals. We’re from the same city, so I... I brought them here to look around...”

The physics professor’s expression eased upon hearing this. There was no anger, just a pivot toward Wade. His curiosity was apparent as he asked, “Wade, you know these students too?”

Wade cleared his throat and affirmed with a subtle nod. “They’re from Hammond’s school. Parkside High School.”

Surprised, the physics professor gave Mirabella and Vincent another glance and casually asked, “How did you do in yesterday’s competition?”

The finals had just ended, and the results were not yet announced.

Before Mirabella and Vincent could respond, Wade interjected sharply. “Parkside High School has always produced top-notch students. I’m sure their performance is nothing short of excellent.”

Pausing for a moment, Wade waved his hand dismissively at his colleague and said, "Alright, enough with the questions. Let the kids go."

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Wade had snatched the physics professor away before he could even finish his question. Leaving the other two department heads without a chance to speak. They all departed together, leaving a palpable void in their wake.

As soon as they were gone, Matthew let out a deep sigh of relief, feeling as though his energy had been sapped by the encounter.

"Those profs are like the academic elite, the *creme de la crème*. Damn it. I swear, I'm scared stiff every time I see them," Matthew muttered under his breath.

Mirabella watched him silently, with an amused glint in her eye. It seemed that no matter the age, the instinctive fear of teachers was universal.

Vincent, although not as outwardly dramatic as his cousin, had also felt the imposing aura of the professors. Out of the corner of his eye, he stole a glance at Mirabella. Her calm and collected demeanor during her exchange with the professor was a stark contrast to their own unease.

Such resilience under pressure!

"But Mirabella, you know Professor Wade?" Matthew asked. His curiosity was aroused.

After a brief pause, Mirabella replied, "Not really. We've met briefly before."

Matthew rubbed his nose thoughtfully, doubting the simplicity of this "brief meeting." The warm manner in which Professor Wade had just addressed her seemed to suggest a more

significant acquaintance.

“Matthew, I think we should head back to the hotel Vincent interjected. “It might get awkward if we bump into more of your department’s faculty.”

Matthew scratched his head, a bit embarrassed. “Yeah, sure.”

“Thanks,” Mirabella said, offering Matthew a polite nod of gratitude.

No sooner had Mirabella and Vincent stepped out of Prestige College than Mr. Hammond, who had suddenly remembered something important he’d forgotten, phoned Mirabella.

Holding her phone, Mirabella looked back at the imposing gates of Prestige College. “We’ve just left Prestige College.”

Mr. Hammond was on his way out of the hotel when he said. “Stay there by Prestige College. I’ll be right there.”

Wade had asked him to introduce the young lady to his biology department, but that had completely slipped his mind.

Mirabella stopped in her tracks, puzzled. “Is there something you needed?”

Vincent halted behind her, waiting for the answer.

“I mentioned Professor Wade to you before, right? I was going to introduce you to him.”

“Oh, we’ve actually just met Professor Wade at the college,” Mirabella said honestly.

Mr. Hammond, about to cross the street, paused at her words. “You’ve already met?”

“Yep,” Mirabella affirmed, recalling that Professor Wade and the other professors seemed to have pressing matters to discuss. She added, “Professor Wade seemed quite busy.” In other words, there was no need to disturb him.

After some thought, Mr. Hammond responded, “Alright, if Wade’s tied up, I won’t drag you over there. He seemed to have a good impression of you anyway.” Soon after, Mr. Hammond ended the call.

And for a good while after, Mr. Hammond’s calls would only reach Wade’s blacklist.

Mirabella pocketed her phone. Then she and Vincent made their way back to the hotel. The competition had ended, the final scores wouldn’t be out until three in the afternoon, and their flight wasn’t until seven in the evening, so several classmates were chatting in their group about going out together to explore. Anthony reminded everyone to stay safe and then let them go on their way.

Back in her room, Mirabella sat resting in a chair, pondering for a moment before reaching for her phone to shoot a message to James on Messenger.