

The Double 291

Chapter 291

Leo's blunt declaration that they were not blood-related was a verbal blockade that instantly curtailed Summer's attempt to broach the subject of the reality show.

If they had no blood ties, why on earth should he take her to a reality show? With no blood ties, what right did she have to spout nonsense here?

Summer knew all too well that Leo had always been icy cold. Whenever he encountered someone he disliked, his words would spare them no dignity.

"Really, Leo? Must you be like this? True, we aren't related by blood, but we've lived as siblings for over a decade," she protested.

"So, are you using that to guilt me into taking you to Walker's reality show?" Leo wasn't one to beat around the bush, and he cut right to the chase. "Didn't Emmitt already deliver my answer to you? I made myself clear to him, and I doubt he failed to pass it on."

Summer's mouth hung open, and her eyes brimmed with tears. "Is it really so hard for you to help me just this once?"

"Sorry, but charity isn't my strong suit," Leo retorted, spotting Mirabella's figure in the distance. He added. "I'm here to pick up my real sister. It's best you leave before there's any misunderstanding."

That final blow shattered the remnants of Summer's pride. She inhaled deeply, straightening her posture and masking her subservience with a blank expression. "You'll regret this," she said, her voice laced with contempt. With a scornful laugh, she turned on her heel and strode

away.

Mirabella approached just in time to catch Summer, pausing mid-step and casting a chilling glance her way. Without a word, they brushed past each other.

Raising an eyebrow, Mirabella turned to watch Summer's retreating figure, walking tall and proud. "What's all this drama about?" she inquired with a hint of amusement.

Collins, who had overheard the entire exchange, pieced together the conflict between Leo and Summer. He remembered suggesting that Leo take Summer to Walker's show, and how Leo instantly brushed that off. Clearly, there was some bad blood.

But he couldn't help thinking, given Summer's pitiful demeanor, that she might have a flair for acting, perhaps more than for singing.

Collins touched his nose thoughtfully before summarizing, "She came begging Leo to take her to the reality show, but he flat-out rejected her."

Although Leo was seated in the car, Collins' words, said behind his back, were perfectly audible. Leo coughed loudly, "Mira, get in the car." Collins was truly out of line, bringing this up in front of Mirabella. What if it upset her?

Mirabella's curiosity receded as she opened the rear car door and slid inside..

Once seated, Leo's hand resting on his knee awkwardly squeezed his own flesh as he muttered. "There's only one sister for me." His demeanor was a stark contrast to the one he had shown Summer moments before.

Catching a glimpse of Leo's uncharacteristically domestic behavior in the rearview mirror, Collins nearly dropped his eyes out of their sockets.

Good heavens, was this the same Jzstin known for his cool and aloof persona? If the fans ever caught wind of this side of him, they'd be dropping like flies!

Mirabella tilted her head towards Leo and simply responded, "Oh."

At that, Leo ruffled his hair in frustration, insisting. "You're the only sister I've got."

Observing the scene, Collins silently covered his face. The image was crumbling, and Juztin's carefully crafted persona was coming undone.

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As Leo steered the car onto the open road, he glanced sideways at Mirabella. After a pause, he asked. "Mira, do you have some medical skills?"

Mirabella, immersed in her phone and leaning against the car door, didn't even look up as she murmured. "A little, yeah."

The response 'a little' plunged Leo and Collins, who was driving, into a stunned silence. If curing an ailment that had stumped hospital specialists with just a few pills could be considered knowing 'a little' about medicine, what would the world's renowned traditional and modern doctors think of themselves?

Thank goodness this admission was made in front of them. Had it been in front of Nikolai today, the guy would have probably shown her the door on the spot.

Too cheeky by half.

"So, you knew all along about my injury?" Leo couldn't help but seek the truth.

With an arch of her brow, Mirabella didn't deny it. "Yes."

Leo rubbed his nose. Feeling the difference between suspecting something and hearing it confirmed was surprisingly jarring.

Even Nick had confirmed that Leo could never go back to his old self, and now Mirabella had effortlessly solved the problem. It felt almost magical.

“Did you go to the hospital to get checked out?” Mirabella prodded, suspecting that her somewhat foolish brother wouldn’t have brought it up otherwise.

“Nah, didn’t hit the hospital. Collins knows this sage of alternative medicine. He checked my pulse and gave me the all-clear,” Leo replied with candid simplicity.

Mirabella didn’t seem surprised and ended with a caution, “Just be more careful out there, and don’t let anyone blindside you.”

Collins, fuming as he drove, smacked the steering wheel. “Whoever’s pulling these dirty tricks from the shadows is despicable.”

Leo’s lips curled into a half-smile. “Whoever benefits the most from my misfortune is the prime suspect.”

“No matter what, we can’t just let this slide,” Collins muttered darkly.

Mirabella’s eyebrows danced playfully as she floated a suggestion. “Maybe you could turn the tables on them?”

Collins’ eyes lit up at the idea. “Not bad. We need to flush out whoever is targeting Leo. They might try the same stunt again.”

Mirabella just smiled and turned her gaze to the passing scenery outside the car window.

10:50

falling silent.

Back at the Gilbert family home, Summer didn’t even come down for dinner, staying locked in her room. She racked her brain for any details from her past life about the Davis family members. Then, pulling out

her phone, she scrolled through Messenger and shot a message to her agent. [Craig, do you know anyone over at Lamont Entertainment?]

Lamont was the agency representing Leo.

Craig replied promptly. (Yeah, why do you ask, Summer?) He remembered her brother was with Lamont Entertainment, right?

Summer: [Could you get me a contact there?]

Without overthinking it—after all, Summer was his client and under a ten-year contract—Craig sent over the contact of an agent he knew at Lamont Entertainment.

Before long, Summer had added Craig's Charisma contact, and after a few more inquiries, she finally got hold of Vicky's number.

Staring at the number on her screen, Summer's eyes darkened as Leo's cold, distant face flashed in her mind. Even when she had cast aside her pride, he remained aloof. If he showed no kindness, why should she show mercy?

A cynical smile played on Summer's lips as her fingers tapped the dial button.

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Time flew by, and before you knew it, the day had arrived for Mirabella to strut her stuff at the city's French competition.

The event was getting the full Hollywood treatment. A crew from the Educational TV network was filming the entire shebang, and planning to spin it into a prime-time special for their channel.

The showdown was set in the grand exhibition hall on the second floor of the municipal sports arena. It was transformed into a stage with atmosphere to spare, thanks to the TV folks who'd wrangled a crowd to fill the seats below the platform.

Mirabella's game plan for joining the contest was straightforward she had her eye on the \$100,000 prize. From the moment she left school, headphones were her constant companion.

A girl, tagging along for the ride, leaned in conspiratorially and asked, "Queen Mira, are you drilling French phrases in there?"

Mirabella turned, about to set the record straight with a 'nope,' when the girl interjected, "Mind if I take a listen?" After a beat, Mirabella graciously handed over one earbud.

When the girl popped it in and was met with the pulse of a pop anthem, she was gobsmacked. Eyes wide as saucers, she stared at Mirabella, struggling to process the scene.

Here they were, minutes from showtime, with everyone else cramming their scripts, and there was Mirabella – not a note in hand, jamming to top forty hits... Seriously? Sure, the song was from her favorite band, and their lead singer's voice was a killer, but was this really the moment?

"How's the tune? The lead's got killer pipes, right?" Mirabella even whipped out her phone, showing off the album cover, pointing out the frontman, "And he's easy on the eyes, too."

The girl from another class had heard tales of Mirabella from the Advanced Class and her ice-queen rep, but this was a whole other vibe. Sharing her music and fan-girling over stars, Mirabella was as down-to-earth as they come.

Totally relatable!

–

The girl was so charmed that she ditched her French script, and the two of them started fangirling hard.

Returning from the draw, their French teacher nearly fainted at their chatter. He quickly separated them and delivered a motivational speech before handing out the assigned numbers.

There were nearly fifty contestants, and the performance order was a lottery.

Mirabella drew number twenty-one, smack in the middle.

An hour later, it was her turn. As she stepped onto the stage, the spotlight hit her, illuminating

her delicate features and highlighting her naturally poised aura.

Scanning the audience, Mirabella's eyes flicked to two sneaky figures tucked in the back corner, causing her eyelids to twitch in irritation.

Regaining her composure, she nodded politely to the judges, and moments later, fluent French poured from her lips.

She recited a well-known piece of poetry sans script – unlike her peers. She stood unshaken, exuding confidence and poise, her pronunciation impeccable. Among the competitors, she was a dazzling standout. Barring any surprises, the top prize was as good as hers.

After a three-minute tour de force, rewarded by thunderous applause, Mirabella's first move backstage was to reach for her phone.

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Mirabella quickly tapped Messenger, her fingers flying across the screen as she shot a text to the contact nicknamed "Delilah" in her phone—her mom. [Mom, what are you and Dad doing here?]

Yes, as she had ascended the podium, a quick scan of the audience had revealed two sneakily ducking heads. They weren't just anybody: they were Delilah and Shawn, her parents.

Despite their attempts to blend in, wearing baseball caps as a disguise, the pair's shifty antics were too conspicuous to miss.

Delilah's phone was on silent, so she didn't notice her daughter's message immediately. Only after a few minutes, when checking the time, did she see it.

Delilah: [Ah, sweetie, what are you talking about?]

Mirabella's lips twitched in amusement as she texted back. [I spotted you both, blue cap and black cap.]

In the audience below the stage, Delilah gave her husband, sitting beside her, a nudge. "Look, our girl's seen us.

Shawn glanced at her phone screen, and after a moment, pride swelled in his chest. "Girl's got sharp eyes."

"But where in the world did she get such a fluent French from?" Shawn stroked his chin, genuinely surprised. This level of proficiency wasn't something you'd expect from the small-town French standards of the town she grew up in.

"She's had a tutor, right? Maybe the tutor taught her?" Delilah mentioned offhandedly.

Hearing his wife's suggestion, Shawn nodded, thinking it quite plausible. He remembered that box of fine coffee beans—the tutor's gift.

"Let's ask her later, see if we can take her tutor out for dinner sometime," Shawn said slowly.

*Sounds good," Delilah agreed with a nod.

An hour later.

Mirabella descended the stairs, diploma, and prize money in hand. By then, Delilah had removed her cap and was taking the diploma from her daughter's hand. "My girl, you are simply outstanding."

Mirabella was used to her mom's spontaneous praise. She handed the check to Shawn, who was standing beside her.

Holding the check, Shawn looked puzzled at his daughter, "What's this?"

Mirabella replied generously. "It's a gift. A new car for you. Pick one out yourself."

Shawn was initially taken aback, but as he looked down at the check and then back up at his daughter to express his heartfelt thanks, Mirabella pulled out her phone and stepped aside to take a call. And so, he closed his mouth.

Wyatt was calling Mirabella.

"Ms. Mirabella, where did you buy that Incense of Calm? Do you have the contact for the seller?" Wyatt sounded somewhat urgent.

Mirabella narrowed her eyes, "What's the matter?"

"It's just that James' chronic issue has flared up again, and we're looking to get a hold of the incense maker for help." Wyatt explained vaguely.

Mirabella furrowed her brows. She remembered James being in fine shape last time in Riverdale. After a few seconds of thought, she asked, "Are you still in Riverdale?"

"No, we're back in Ashford," Wyatt replied without thinking.

"Send me the address," Mirabella said calmly.

Upon hearing this, Wyatt assumed Mirabella intended to bring the incense maker to them. He quickly agreed and hung up after the exchange.

Mirabella pocketed her phone after receiving Wyatt's text with the address. She glanced at the details and then tucked the device away. She turned to rejoin her parents and didn't let them get a word in before she spoke, "Mom, Dad, go home without me. I've got something I need to take care of."

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Half an hour later, Mirabella arrived at the address Wyatt had sent her. She had barely stepped out of the taxi when Wyatt, who had been waiting by the entrance of the residential complex, spotted her.

Striding towards her, he saw the taxi speed away, and noticing that she was alone, a wave of disappointment washed over him. However, he quickly mustered a forced smile and said, "Ms Mirabella, has the person who crafts the incense... not arrived yet?"

Mirabella glanced at Wyatt. "No, they haven't."

Wyatt took this to mean the person might be running late. He nodded and said, "Oh... well then, let's go inside. I'll come back out when they get here."

With a soft hum of agreement, Mirabella didn't offer further explanation.

Wyatt's car was parked on the curb. He courteously opened the door for Mirabella, waited for her to get in, and then closed it behind her before taking his place in the driver's seat. Soon after, with a swipe of a card, the gates to the complex opened, and Wyatt drove through.

Minutes later, Mirabella stepped out of the car and cast a brief, indifferent glance at the villa before following Wyatt inside.

Inside the spacious villa, several people stood in a tense atmosphere. Mirabella's gaze swept the room, pausing slightly upon seeing Nikolai and another person beside him, but she quickly regained her composure.

James was slouched on the sofa, his face ghostly pale and his lips devoid of any color. Noticing Mirabella's entrance, he was visibly taken aback. Then his eyes shifted to Wyatt, instantly realizing that Wyatt had brought her.

James straightened up slightly, but this movement caused a tumult in his chest, leading to a violent cough. Blood tinged the corner of his lips, which he calmly wiped away with a tissue.

"You've come," he said, his voice as cool and detached as ever.

Mirabella's eyes darkened slightly, and she simply responded with an acknowledgment. Her presence drew the looks of several people in the room. Concerned about James' injuries.. Nikolai addressed her with a curt, "Mirabella."

At the sound of "Mirabella," Curtis instantly remembered Wyatt's reference to Ms. Mirabella and made the connection. His eyebrows knitted together as his piercing gaze swept over her before he looked away.

Curtis soon lifted his head again, this time not to look at Mirabella but to address Wyatt with a heavy tone. "Didn't you say you were picking up a miracle healer?" What use was bringing an ordinary person who knew nothing?

James' chronic illness had flared up again. His injury was indirectly caused by Mirabella inviting him to the night market. Thinking this, Curtis' expression turned even colder.

Wyatt scratched his head, aware of Curtis' prejudice against Mirabella, and chose to ignore his icy demeanor, replying in a muffled voice, "Ms. Mirabella's miracle healer friend will be here

shortly."

Curtis let out a sarcastic snort and glanced at Mirabella again. "Can't wait to see that." Only Wyatt, stubborn as he was, would believe in the arrival of a miracle healer. If such a person truly existed, Mirabella wouldn't have arrived here alone.

Mirabella remained composed in the face of the hostility directed at her, walking steadily forward. Noticing James' pallor, her brow furrowed slightly. The recurrence of his chronic condition and his disrupted inner energy were clearly not something that could be brushed off as a minor injury.

Her eyes caught sight of the Incense of Calm burning gently nearby. Without hesitation, she walked over and snuffed it out.

Curtis' eyes flew open at this action, and he growled in alarm, "What are you doing!"

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The incense was crucial. It was the very thing that was holding off James' injuries from worsening, and Mirabella had snuffed it out without a second thought.

Curtis' eyes blazed with fury, his already intimidating visage now terrifying in his anger. He strode over, snatched the half-burned incense stick from Mirabella's grasp, and fished out a lighter, on the verge of reigniting it.

Mirabella was unshaken by his fearsome appearance, smirking ever so slightly. "If you want him dead sooner, by all means, light it up again." Her voice was soft, almost airy, but carried an undercurrent of sharpness that you couldn't quite put your finger on.

Curtis' hand paused. He knew he shouldn't let the uninformed words of Mirabella sway him, but his finger lingered on the lighter, unable to press down.

Nikolai overheard the exchange, instinctively glanced at Mirabella, and inquired, "Why can't we light the incense?"

Mirabella took a seat beside James, simply stating, "Your hand."

James turned, noting that although Mirabella's expression was as usual, the intensity he saw in her eyes was something he had never witnessed before, a maturity that didn't match her

years.

He extended his hand. Her fingertips rested lightly on his wrist, and as she took his pulse, a veil of solemnity descended over her delicate features. Moments later, she withdrew her hand.

Her gaze fell on James' previously injured leg, then she leaned over, lifting his pant leg for a quick inspection before letting it fall back into place.

"Paper. Pen," Mirabella commanded succinctly.

Wyatt, hearing her request, reflexively searched for the items. He returned shortly, handing them to Mirabella with a reverence greater than before. He no longer pondered the origins of her knowledge in scent-crafting or her physician friend. From the pulse-taking action, it was clear she had some medical expertise.

Mirabella quickly drafted a list of ingredients on the paper. Once finished, she handed it to Wyatt, "I need these herbs."

Pausing, she added, "However, some of them might be hard to find."

Holding the prescription, Wyatt was resolute, "No matter how hard, I'll find them." At that moment, he had put all his hopes on Mirabella.

After a thought, she noted, "Well, there's no rush. Just have them ready within three days."

Wyatt, hearing her nonchalance, stole a worried glance at James. His condition seemed anything but non-urgent. Though perplexed, Wyatt dared not question further. "I'll start preparing now," he said.

As he moved to leave, Curtis grabbed his arm, halting him. Wyatt looked at him, confused by his intentions.

Curtis glanced at Mirabella, then at the list of herbs in Wyatt's hand. His gaze settled on Wyatt's face, his voice deep and serious. "James condition is no joke."

Ms. Mirabella appeared capable of medicine, quickly took a pulse, and drafted a prescription. but when even Nikolai was reluctant to administer treatment easily, how could her casual demeanor inspire trust in her healing abilities?

Could Wyatt really believe that a girl barely out of her teens possessed remarkable medical skills? Skills that could surpass those of Nikolai, heir to a century-old legacy of alternative medicine, hailed as a national healer?

Wyatt met Curtis' gaze, fully understanding his concerns, yet he breathed deeply and firmly stated, "I trust Ms. Mirabella."

Curtis frowned. "You..."

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Before Curtis could get a word out, Nikolai approached from the side, his voice tinged with an undercurrent of excitement. "Show me that prescription again, will you?"

While Mirabella had been jotting down the list of ingredients, Nikolai had instinctively moved closer to peer over her shoulder, absorbing each item she listed. Every ingredient she penned down sent a jolt of shock through him, and by the time she had finished, his mind was blown to smithereens. It took him a moment to come back to his senses, and then he couldn't wait to double-check the prescription.

Wyatt glanced at Nikolai, whose mood had swung from gloomy to positively electric, and without hesitation, Wyatt passed the prescription back to him.

Nikolai scrutinized the list of ingredients once more, and only after a thorough examination did he finally confirm that the recipe was indeed a long-lost ancient remedy. Trembling, he handed the piece of paper back to Wyatt.

“Nikolai?” Curtis called out, noticing that Nikolai’s hands were shaking rather severely.

Nikolai looked up at Curtis. “The prescription is sound.” He spared the technicalities, knowing they were beyond the others.

At that, disbelief painted Curtis’ face, “Are you telling me this can treat James?”

“It might not cure him completely, but it should stop his condition from deteriorating further.” Nikolai explained slowly, pausing to glance at Mirabella with a hint of admiration. “The younger generation really does surpass the older one. Mirabella’s medical knowledge might just exceed my own.”

He remembered how he had once considered taking the young girl as his apprentice and now felt quite embarrassed.

Hearing this, Wyatt burst out, “I’ll go get the ingredients right now.” He clutched the prescription and hurried towards the exit of the villa.

Nikolai made his way over to Mirabella.

Curtis, who remained where he was, had a conflicted expression. He instinctively looked toward Mirabella, reflecting on his earlier behavior and his prejudices against her. Before even meeting her in person, he believed she wasn’t someone fit for polite society and even blamed her for the relapse of his master’s old ailment. Suddenly, his cheeks felt hot with shame.

Nikolai took a seat on the sofa across from Mirabella, and noticing the extinguished Incense of Calm nearby, he asked, puzzled, “Why can’t we burn this incense?”

Her expression was indifferent as she responded, "The incense contains musk, which only exacerbates the turmoil in his blood and energy." After a brief pause, she glanced at James. "Hence the coughing up of blood."

Curtis, who had just approached, overheard this and thought about his previous attitude, his

face reddening once again.

"I never considered that," Nikolai admitted with a wry smile. "It's fortunate you arrived when you did, or I might have made a grave mistake." He had been the one to instruct the lighting of the

incense.

"It's no trouble. The problem isn't severe," Mirabella replied nonchalantly, waving a hand dismissively. She then turned to James with a raised eyebrow, "You didn't take the medicine I gave you last time, did you?" Her question sounded rhetorical, laced with certainty.

James coughed again, the sickly pallor of his face lending him a fragile beauty. Once he caught his breath, he murmured, "Hmm?" The next second, he remembered the medicine she'd given him after dropping her off at the airport.

"I forgot," he admitted.

Mirabella's smile held a trace of amusement, so that's why very time she saw him, he seemed to be getting worse.

Uncomfortable under her gaze, James turned to Curtis and commanded, "Go to the drawer of my bedside table. There's a ceramic jar in there."

Curtis nodded respectfully and dashed upstairs, moving as swiftly as his legs could carry him.

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Mirabella slouched back against the couch, her gaze lingering thoughtfully as Curtis' figure disappeared upstairs. It was only when he was out of sight that she allowed her gaze to drift away. It seemed that her once unassuming neighbor might have a more complicated background than she had initially thought.

Soon enough, Curtis returned with a porcelain jar, which he handed to James with a respectful gesture.

James glanced toward Mirabella. With a nonchalant lift of her eyelids, she said, "One a day."

James didn't press further. He unscrewed the lid and shook a pill the size of a pea into his hand.

No longer skeptical about the pill's legitimacy, Curtis poured a glass of water and handed it to his boss. After swallowing the pill, James felt a wave of relief wash over him. His complexion, once pallid, now held a healthier hue.

Observing the apparent effect, Curtis suddenly bowed toward Mirabella. "I apologize for my earlier rudeness, Ms. Mirabella. I hope you can forgive my indiscretion."

Mirabella glanced at Curtis, her eyes inadvertently sweeping over the scar that ran from his temple to the back of his head before she waved her hand dismissively. "It's fine."

Feeling a twinge of shame, Curtis insisted, "Should you need anything in the future, Ms. Mirabella, please don't hesitate to ask."

Mirabella's eyelid twitched, and she quickly replied, "No need, there isn't anything."

Curtis paused, taken aback.

Clearing her throat, Mirabella turned her attention back to James, "Have you been feeling a stabbing pain in your shin lately?"

James nodded, "Yes, it's been more noticeable these past few days. I had it checked out, but they didn't find anything wrong."

Leaning casually against the armrest, Mirabella seemed aloof as she pondered for a moment before speaking, "The old injury in your body is actually linked to a wound on your shin."

Nikolai had also examined James' leg without finding any injury, and had checked his pulse. without detecting any anomalies besides the underlying condition. He asked curiously. "What do you mean by that?"

"Some wounds aren't visible to the naked eye." Mirabella said with a tight-lipped smile, leaving it at that.

Nikolai, realizing she wasn't going to elaborate, changed the subject, "Do you have a way to completely heal James' chronic condition?"

Curtis' gaze was fixed intently on Mirabella..

She shrugged. "Not at the moment."

Her response clearly disappointed Curtis, but he quickly nodded in acknowledgment. "Please do what you can to help James recover. Ms. Mirabella."

Mirabella simply glanced at him, saying nothing more.

"Mirabella, is the prescription you just mentioned from an old herbal compendium?" Nikolai inquired.

Touching the tip of her nose, Mirabella replied without batting an eyelid, "I'm not quite sure. I just saw it in a medical text."

Nikolai's expression became oddly puzzled at her response. Last time, at the Mendoza family gathering, when he asked if she practiced medicine, she had claimed to have a passing knowledge from books. And now, her answer was strikingly similar. If he hadn't just seen her prescription, he might have been easily convinced again.

Mirabella ignored Nikolai's complicated look, checked the time, and stood up. "I don't have much else to do here, so I'll be heading out."

Pausing, as if remembering something, she turned to Nikolai, "You have the equipment for concocting remedies, right?" After all, Nikolai was from a family steeped in a century of alternative medicine.

Nikolai nodded.

"Good. Once you've got all the herbs together, let me know," Mirabella said before making her

exit.

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Mirabella waved a casual goodbye to James, not waiting for a reply, and strolled out of the luxurious villa.

Curtis, ever the gentleman, quickly piped up. "I'll drive you, Miss Mirabella." He followed closely behind her, careful to respect her space.

Nikolai watched Mirabella's retreating form, his gaze lingering long after she had vanished from sight. He then turned to see James, who looked vastly different from just moments ago, and his eyes fell on the bottle in his hand. "Might I have a look at that medicine, James?"

James nodded and handed the bottle over to Nikolai without hesitation.

Nikolai twisted off the cap and took a delicate sniff, his eyes widening in shock. “This is... this can’t be...”

In the car, Curtis drove with due diligence, occasionally glancing at Mirabella in the rearview mirror, his curiosity evident.

Who would have thought that this young girl, appearing no older than a high schooler, could impress the esteemed Nikolai, someone considered a giant in the field of traditional medicine?

As Curtis’ mind raced with thoughts of James’ injuries, he hadn’t taken the time to observe the girl. Now, in the quiet of the car, he noticed that she had never once shown a hint of panic, not even when facing his own fury. Her composure was far from typical for a teenager.

Who exactly was this girl called Mirabella? Curtis was a bundle of questions.

Aware of Curtis’ scrutiny, Mirabella didn’t even bother lifting her eyelids, maintaining her nonchalant demeanor.

The car ride was silent.

Out of boredom, Mirabella fished out her phone to play a game. As she played, a Twitter notification popped up at the top of her screen, causing her fingers to pause mid-tap. After a brief moment of distraction, the game’s screen dimmed, indicating her character’s demise.

She squinted her eyes and switched over to Twitter, not bothering to wait for the in-game resurrection.

The trending topics were all about her brother’s injury. She tapped on one and skimmed through the comments with a slight sneer, her eyes growing colder. Soon after, she closed the

app.

In the driver’s seat, Curtis felt a vague chill in the air and subconsciously glanced at the rearview mirror, but nothing seemed amiss. Strange, he thought.

Twenty minutes later, Curtis dropped Mirabella at the entrance to her modest apartment

complex. He watched her disappear through the gates before starting the engine and driving off, giving the unremarkable, slightly worn neighborhood one last look.

Meanwhile, Collins was pacing his office, phone in hand, his face clouded with worry as he scrolled through Twitter. "I knew something like this would happen," he muttered.

The buzz on Twitter revolved around one alarming piece of news: "Neon Paradox's frontman Juztin rumored to be seriously injured, possibly signaling the end for the beloved band."

Neon Paradox's enduring fame, largely thanks to Leo's explosive performances and unique vocal style, had amassed a legion of fans. At the peak of their success, rumors of Leo's injury and disbandment were the last things they needed.

Collins was particularly frustrated, as he was in the midst of sealing endorsement deals with several luxury brands. Now, with this scandal brewing, those brands might reconsider their offers.

While Collins was a bundle of nerves, Leo sat on the couch, the picture of serenity. He had cycled through despair and resignation several times since his injury, and now, oddly, he felt a sense of detachment about it all.

Looking up at Collins, Leo suddenly said, "Maybe it's for the best if the band did break up."

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Collins' jaw practically hit the floor at the revelation. "Leo, have you lost your marbles? Weren't you always the one who-

Leo pressed his lips together, cutting Collins off mid-sentence. "What I stand for doesn't necessarily reflect the rest of the band, you know. Why do you think there's a buzz about us breaking up?"

He paused, a cold laugh escaping him. "My injury was just the spark."

Collins fell silent, his mind racing back to Vicky's recent behavior, a growing suspicion taking root. "You think... could it be Vicky who's got it in for you? Do you think he poisoned your drink or something?" He remembered Vicky's vast network of friends. In particular, those fancy club buddies he'd never even heard of that were all hush-hush.

"It's a possibility. After all, the news of my injury was kept between us. And his reaction? It was like he was dead sure I'd be out of the picture," Leo mused, his voice measured.

"I'll keep an eye on him. Mirabella was just talking about turning the tables, and now it looks like we've got our chance. Shame about those luxury brand deals and endorsements we were lining up." Collins heaved a sigh that felt heavy as lead.

Leo glanced at him, not in the mood for chit-chat.

"What about that Twitter mess? Got a game plan for that?" Collins broached another topic. "Let them make noise," Leo dismissed, then after a moment's thought, added, "But Collins, you'd better ring up Walker to clarify things."

At the mention of Walker, Collins nodded. "Slipped my mind. I'm on it."

He fished out his phone and dialed Walker's number. The call connected almost instantly. After a brief exchange, Collins hung up and looked towards Leo. "Walker says we're cool."

"Good," Leo exhaled, visibly relieved.

Collins placed his phone on the table, leaning against its edge. "Too bad about that NDA, huh? Can't spill the beans about you joining Walker's show. It would've blown this whole injury rumor out of the water."

Leo raised an eyebrow. "Don't you think a comeback that slaps the rumors in the face is much more satisfying?" The buzz this controversy could generate would set the stage for an even more dramatic reveal when the show aired.

Collins gave Leo an unexpectedly admiring look. "Leo, your noggin seems to be working overtime these days."

You used to be oblivious to the world, man. You think your sister's brainpower is rubbing off on you?" Collins stroked his chin, considering the possibility seriously.

Leo just glared. Screw you, Collins!

Emmitt scrolled through the online chatter about Leo's supposed injury. Although skeptical, he couldn't shake off the concern for his brother and decided to give Leo a call. But after several rings, there was no answer.

After much deliberation, Emmitt headed over to the Davis family home in the evening. As the doorbell chimed, the family was gathered at the dinner table. Mirabella, nearly done with her meal, rose to answer the door.

When she pulled it open to reveal Emmitt on the doorstep, she paused in surprise before calling out flatly. "Hi Emmitt."

Emmitt had anticipated this cold reception from his sister. Her chilly tone left a bitter taste, and he managed an awkward acknowledgment before asking. "Leo's home, right?"

"Yeah." Mirabella's response was curt as she turned and walked back inside.

Watching her retreating figure, Emmitt lingered in the doorway, a momentary hesitation slowing his steps before he finally entered the house.