

## The Double 311

### Chapter 311

The buzz of anticipation filled the staff room at Parkside High School. Every teacher leaned in, hanging on Mr. Hammond's next words.

Clearing his throat, Mr. Hammond decided to cut to the chase, "Folks, two of our students from Parkside High have made it to the finals." He paused, letting the suspense thicken before dropping the bombshell, "And topping the preliminary round with the only perfect score is our very own Mirabella."

The declaration sent a wave of excitement through the room. The International Competition was no ordinary exam. It was a beast of its own. Mirabella wasn't just talented; she was a phenomenon.

Sitting among her colleagues, Annette felt her eyes well up with pride. When Mirabella had first joined her Advanced Class, she worried the girl might struggle to keep up. But Mirabella had proven her wrong, time and again, shattering expectations.

While Annette was visibly moved, Morgan, sitting beside her, kept his gaze down, his right hand trembling slightly on the desktop. First place in the national round, now a top finish in the international preliminaries, and likely the same in the

finals—bitterness tinged Morgan's thoughts. If only he hadn't let his prejudices cloud his judgment.

Elsewhere, in a different kind of silence, a plush villa basked in the evening light.

"Mirabella's preliminary scores are in," announced Curtis, balancing a laptop on his knee. Its screen displayed the official results of the international contest.

Wyatt leaned in eagerly, "How'd she do?"

"First place," Curtis replied, lips tightening, "with a perfect score."

Wyatt's face went slack with awe. "Man, I used to think I could match her grades."

Curtis shot him a disdainful look. "In your dreams."

"Right... some people are just on a different level," Wyatt murmured.

Closing the laptop, Curtis shelved the topic as James descended the staircase. Wyatt and Curtis straightened up as he approached. Wyatt cleared his throat and spoke up, "Sir, Mirabella aced it again—a perfect score and first place. She's something else."

James shot him a glance. "Don't you have better things to do?" He slouched onto the sofa, exuding an air of nonchalance.

Wyatt shot up, "Oh, right! I've got that tea date with the neighbor—gotta talk real estate. Will catch you later, Sir."

With that, he was gone.

While seizing the opportunity, Curtis stood up too, "I'll go check on... things."

James had been acting a bit strange lately. Every time he and Wyatt talked about Ms. Mirabella, the gaze James would shoot them was enough to send shivers down their spines. It was best to avoid him when possible.

As soon as they were gone, James fished out his phone and opened Messenger. Swiftly, he typed. [Congrats on first place.]

At her hotel, Mirabella raised an eyebrow at the message and replied. [Thanks.]

After a moment, she sent another. [How have you been feeling lately?]

Since concocting that remedy for him, she'd been swamped with competition prep, courtesy of Mr. Hammond, and hadn't checked in on James' health.

Back in the villa, James' fingers hesitated on the screen before he typed. [Not great.]

Mirabella's brow furrowed, [What happened?]

James shifted in his seat, his handsome features relaxed. [It's my chest... feels kind of tight.]

Chapter 312

Mirabella stroked her chin in thought before texting back, [I'll take a look when I have some time.]

James replied, [Thanks, I really appreciate your help.]

Mirabella shot back a quick emoji, wrapping up their conversation swiftly.

No sooner had she snapped her phone shut with plans to catch some shut-eye, than it buzzed again. It was a message from Nick on Messenger.

LIN: [Done with the competition?]

Lying on her bed, Mirabella responded with a brief [Yep.]

LIN: [I've got a surprise for you. Swing by my place? I'll have my assistant pick you up from the hotel.]

As Nick sent the message, his eyes glanced at the three large boxes on the floor.

Last night's hefty bank transfer from Nick caught her eye. With a flick of her finger across the screen, she sighed and messaged him back, [Alright.]

Shortly after, Mirabella, clutching her purse, headed downstairs.

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Thirty minutes later, Mirabella and Nick's assistant drove through the gates of a stately European manor.

Multiple security checkpoints barred the entrance, only allowing access upon successful verification. The assistant, well-accustomed to this, swiftly navigated through, and they entered the villa grounds.

Mirabella eyed the modernized manor with curiosity. As she stepped out, the assistant bid her farewell and drove off.

Inside the grand foyer, Nick beckoned, "Mira, take a seat." He then headed to the kitchen.

Mirabella didn't sit. Instead, she examined the smart systems around the hall with interest. Detecting a stranger, a nearby robot rolled up, issuing a warning beep.

Raising an eyebrow, Mirabella pressed a metal button atop its head, silencing it instantly.

Nick returning with

asked skeptically, "You know how to handle robots?"

Mirabella glanced at the now-docile machine, shrugged, and said, "First time seeing one. Just seemed like high-tech, so I poked its head."

Nick didn't dwell on it and handed her the drink. As Mirabella took the bottle, ensuring not to touch him and maintaining a distance of about three feet, she thanked him, "Thanks, Nick."

Nick pursed his lips, then pushed the three large boxes toward her, "Check these out, see if you like them?"

Mirabella had just twisted off the cap and taken a sip when the sight of the three large boxes made her temples throb with apprehension. Surely they weren't filled with fluffy toys?

She set the bottle on the coffee table and cautiously opened the boxes. Stacks of books, workbooks, and sets of test papers stared back at her, her face freezing in

disbelief.

Opening the other two, she found even more unique test papers and study materials. Words failed to describe her mood at that moment.

"Zach mentioned you like studying. I wasn't sure if these would be useful, but if not, I can have my assistant find something else," Nick said slowly, his tone serious as though he would dispatch his assistant on a new mission if she disapproved.

At the mention of Zach's name, Mirabella's lips twitched into a reluctant smile.

## Chapter 313

The cash transfer fiasco had been bad enough the night before, but now, with the onslaught of study material, Mirabella was pretty sure her sibling bond with Zach was hanging by a thread. She took a deep breath and managed to force a smile. "It's fine. This is enough. No need to dig around for more."

"Okay," Nick let out a sigh of relief, then added, "I'll mail these back to you later."

Mirabella averted her gaze, noncommittally mumbling an "Mhm" as she did.

Nick moved the boxes to a corner of the room, his pale face looking even more ghostly under the artificial light.

Mirabella eyed Nick thoughtfully. On the drive over, his assistant mentioned to her that Nick's place was a fortress of solitude, only ever breached by his therapist and rarely anyone else. The guy was a total research junkie, often locking himself away in his lab for weeks, even months, without coming up for air.

Regaining her composure, Mirabella sipped her drink and casually struck up a new topic, "Nick, do you live here all by yourself?"

"Yeah," Nick replied. A thought seemed to strike him, and leaning against the wall, he turned to Mirabella, "How did your competition go today?"

"Not bad, just made it to the finals," Mirabella answered with modesty.

Nick hadn't followed the event but nodded in appreciation, "Oh, that's pretty impressive."

To avoid an awkward silence, Nick pulled out his phone. "What's the name of the competition? Can I look it up online?"

Mirabella shrugged, "I'm not really sure. There is news about the domestic ones, but I haven't checked for international ones."

Hearing this, Nick put his phone away and glanced at the clock on the wall. "I should start on dinner. Any dietary restrictions I should know about?"

"No, I'm simple when it comes to food."

Nick hummed an acknowledgment and headed to the kitchen without another word.

Mirabella sat down on the couch, feeling a bit bored. She gestured to the nearby smart robot, her hand accidentally sweeping through its sensor zone, prompting it to trundle over to her.

When it got close, she pressed a few buttons on its chest out of curiosity. Its head display lit up with a stream of data. Mirabella glanced at it, found it dull, and pushed the buttons again, returning the robot to its default state.

Twenty minutes later, Nick was done cooking. He laid out a modest yet artfully presented spread of three dishes and soup on the table, then called Mirabella over to

eat.

Mirabella raised an eyebrow in surprise at the sight of the meal. Nick had some serious culinary chops.

Nick brought over two sets of cutlery, and after Mirabella asked which set was hers, she grabbed it and sat at the opposite end of the rectangular table. Considering the logistics required to reach for dishes, she just took one dish for herself. "Nick, this portion is fine for me."

Nick was confused. Was there something a bit off with his sister? Throughout dinner, Nick couldn't help but glance at Mirabella sitting at the far end of the table. It was certainly an unusual way to share a meal.

After dinner, with plenty of evening left, Nick didn't rush Mirabella back to her hotel. Instead, he turned on the TV and settled on the couch.

Mirabella came out of the bathroom and saw Nick sitting there. Walking over, she very considerably chose the spot farthest from him to sit down.

Nick silently observed her. Here was this keeping distance thing again.

Chapter 314

At the crack of dawn, Nick dropped Mirabella off at her hotel.

In the car, Mirabella leaned back in her seat, her smartphone in hand, lost in thought. Though the heap of study materials she received was disheartening, she couldn't ignore the generous bonus that came her way. Not sending a thank-you gift just wasn't her style.

After pondering for a moment, Mirabella turned to Nick and said, "Nick, shoot me your address later, okay? I'll mail you a box of sandalwood incense when I get back home."

Those who often relied on therapists for sleep usually struggled to get some rest, and it was apparent in his gaunt appearance. Though not ill, the wear and tear of life could take its toll.

Nick was momentarily taken aback but quickly recovered, responding, "No worries, you don't have to go through all that trouble."

"I insist. It's a welcome gift! You can't say no," Mirabella stated with earnest seriousness.

Nick couldn't help but glance at her and, finally relenting, said, "Alright, I'll drop my address in your Messenger later."

"Great," Mirabella nodded in satisfaction, pausing before adding, "Everyone who's used my incense hasn't had trouble sleeping through the night."

At the mention of insomnia, a wave of warmth swept through Nick's heart. It was an issue that had plagued him for years, and he wasn't sure how Mirabella knew. He didn't refuse her offer even though he knew sandalwood held no magic cure for him.. "Okay."

"But do you make these yourself?" Nick was curious, as she had referred to them as 'my incense.'

Mirabella looked down modestly, "I try to."

"By the way, when's your flight?" Nick asked in his typically sluggish manner.

Mirabella twirled her phone in her hand. "I think it's tomorrow afternoon."



After a brief silence, Nick offered, "I could take you to the airport."

Mirabella waved the offer away. "No need. It's always crowded there. I'll just head over with a classmate."

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Nick opened his mouth to speak, feeling there was some misunderstanding between them.

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The next day.

The three students who had been eliminated came to see off Mirabella and Vincent. After yesterday's results, Mirabella seemed to carry all their hopes.

The usually pressure-free Mirabella felt an odd weight on her shoulders as she entered the examination room.

Three hours later, the test was over, and the scores for the finals would be

announced in an hour. Thus, after the exam, everyone gathered in the lobby, waiting anxiously.

Mirabella sat in a corner, seemingly the most composed of all, chatting on her phone while everyone else was on edge.

She was having a conversation with Collins, who had recently added her on Messenger. With Walker's 'Country Comfort' about to start filming in a few days, Collins had sent her a list of things to be mindful of on Messenger.

Mirabella took serious note of Collins' advice. After all, she couldn't let her superstar brother down on their upcoming variety show.

Just then, someone shouted, "Scores are up!"

The results were displayed on a large LCD screen in the center of the lobby. As the announcement echoed, heads turned in unison towards the screen.

Mirabella's grip on her phone tightened, and she, too, slowly lifted her gaze:

Chapter 315

The LCD screen scrolled leisurely, revealing the ultimate scores of this year's grand competition.

In first place, Mirabella, with a perfect score of 200.

Second place went to...

Landing in twenty-seventh place: Vincent, with a score of 173.

"Booyah, we nailed the top spot! Our country finally took the gold!"

"Mirabella, you're absolutely stellar!"

"I'm so choked up right now. Tears are welling up."

The students clustered around Mirabella were suddenly hugging each other, their eyes brimming with tears of joy.

This wasn't just a personal victory but a triumph for their nation. This year, their country had finally made it to the leaderboard in the global finals, where national pride overshadowed individual glory.

Mirabella gazed at her score on the big screen, a modest smile playing at the corners of her mouth, basking in her own glory.

Vincent turned to face her, his eyes carrying a subtle admiration, and murmured, "Congratulations, Mirabella, on clinching first place."

"You're not too shabby yourself," she replied with genuine encouragement.

Vincent just smiled, saying nothing more.

Soon enough, the news of Mirabella's sensational victory with a full score spread like wildfire back home, astounding those who were still reeling from the preliminary

rounds.

It had been ages since their nation had stormed into the finals, let alone in first place with a full score. Thus, the name Mirabella was destined to be recorded in the annals of legends and serve as an inspiration for not just the next but several generations of competitors.

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Back at the hotel.

Mirabella carefully packed the gleaming trophy into her suitcase. The sight of it made her lips curve into a smile by reflex. Her grandmom Catherine would be over the moon with this trophy.

After packing, Mirabella wheeled her suitcase out of her room.

Before long, the group hailed a taxi and sped off to the airport. With an hour left before their flight, Mirabella stepped away to take a call from Nick in the waiting area. "Nick, I told you, you didn't need to come see me off," she said, maintaining a distance.

Nick chuckled ruefully as he looked at his sister standing afar. "Do we really need to talk this far apart, Mira?"

She touched her nose sheepishly.

Nick stepped closer, and as he gazed into his little sister's bright eyes, he felt a tug at his heartstrings. He raised his hand to her head and ruffled her hair gently. "We're siblings, Mira. There's no need for distance."

Mirabella, who was used to being the one doing the patting, was taken aback. She thought Nick didn't like being close to others? Dame it, she got played by Zach!

Meanwhile, Zach, halfway across the world, sneezed unexpectedly and felt a mysterious chill down his spine.

After chatting to Nick for twenty minutes or so, Mirabella glanced at her watch. "Nick, try to visit home when you can," she suggested.

He paused, then looked down and softly agreed, "Sure." His mind seemed to be

elsewhere.

Mirabella didn't press further. "You should head back now, Nick. I'm about to board."

"Alright, safe travels. Text me when you get home," Nick said slowly.

With a nod, Mirabella returned to the departure gate.

After standing alone for a few moments, Nick sighed softly, his breath fading into the airport hustle. He turned and left, his footsteps echoing faintly behind him.

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By the time Mirabella arrived back in Ashford, it was the early hours of the next morning.

## Chapter 316

Mirabella returned home and, due to jet lag, crashed for nearly a full day, not waking until 6 p.m. When she finally got up, she freshened up quickly and made her way downstairs.

As soon as she reached the living room, she noticed Collins lounging on the couch. She nodded in greeting and then headed to the fridge to grab a bottle of water.

Collins turned to her, a playful smirk on his face. "Mirabella, you're quite the rockstar, aren't you? Jetting off and knocking out the international competition."

Mirabella took a couple of gulps of water before meeting his gaze, her tone nonchalant. "Just doing what I do."

Collins' smile twitched; why did he even bother setting himself up for that ego knock? "By the way, Mira, we're scheduled for that show the day after tomorrow. You're good to go, right?" Collins had been waiting at the Davis residence for half the day just to bring up the upcoming gig.

"Yeah, no sweat," Mirabella replied as she settled into the sofa.

The show would be starting over the weekend.

“Great. I mean, I’ve briefed you on what to expect. Just stick close to Leo, and you’ll be fine.” Collins advised.

“Got it,” Mirabella said, curling her legs beneath her on the couch. “So, this show doesn’t have a script or anything?”

“Nope, it’s all improv,” Collins said, raising an eyebrow teasingly. “You’re not getting stage fright, are you, brainiac?”

Mirabella shot him a lazy glance. “I’m just worried if I go full throttle, I might steal everyone else’s thunder.”

Collins threw her a playful punch. Smart and quick-witted as always.

He glanced at his watch and stood up. “Alright, I should head out. Hit me up on Messenger if anything comes up.”

“Will do,” Mirabella said with a subtle pursing of her lips.

After Collins left, Leo turned to Mirabella. “You saw Nick, right?”

1/2

10:58

“Yeah, I did.” Mirabella paused for a moment before asking, “Why does Nick stay abroad all the time? Does he ever come home?”

“He’s got his work cut out for him overseas. Probably keeps him too busy. He only comes back home once every few years,” Leo replied softly.

“Oh,” Mirabella nodded and let the topic drop.

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The next day, Mirabella made another trip to the herbal market, straight to a shop called Nature’s Apothecary. She needed various herbs for an insomnia remedy and handed the owner a list. Though the list was long, the ingredients were common, and the owner quickly gathered what she needed.

Mirabella waited while the herbs were ground into powder, taking the chance to send a message to James. Once she got a reply confirming he was free, she pocketed her phone again.

Soon, the owner handed over the powdered herbs. Mirabella transferred the payment and picked up her bag to leave. Just as she reached the door, someone came in, nearly bumping into her.

“Oh! Mirabella, what brings you here?” It was Nikolai, seemingly surprised to see Mirabella.

She hadn’t expected to run into Nikolai either and gave him a polite nod, lifting the bag slightly. “Just picking up some herbs.”

Nikolai’s eyes practically sparkled. “You’re concocting something again? What is it this time? Need an assistant?”

Mirabella just looked at him silently. “I’m not making medicine and don’t need an assistant.”

Letting Nikolai watch her make James’ medicine last time was probably the worst decision she had ever made.

“Oh, I see...” Nikolai’s face fell, disappointment lacing his voice. “Well, if you ever do need a hand, you know where to find me, right?”

Nikolai's apprentice at the counter, who had just been handling Mirabella's herbs, dropped his jaw in shock at the exchange.

## Chapter 317

Was it his eyes or his ears that were giving him trouble? Why on earth was his mentor speaking to a young lady with such earnestness?

Nikolai's apprentice approached with a look of confusion. "Sir, what are you up to...?" With a disdainful glance, Nikolai retorted, "We're both human. Why must you be so dim-witted?"

The apprentice was at a loss for words.

Nikolai dismissed him and, as if struck by a sudden thought, turned his attention back to Mirabella, saying, "Mirabella, you're not busy, are you?"

"Go ahead," Mirabella replied, her voice tinged with resignation.

Dealing with this old man was a headache. Even if she managed to slip away now, he'd surely hound her later on Messenger.

"Come, take a seat. There's a book I'd like you to look at for me." Nikolai, fearing she might make a run for it, grabbed Mirabella's arm and led her to a nearby chair. He then turned to his apprentice and commanded, "Don't just stand there. Made Mirabella something to drink!"

Startled by the reprimand, the apprentice quickly went to fetch the water. What had gotten into Nikolai today? He was usually so genial!

Nikolai went behind the counter and, with a key, opened a drawer. He carefully retrieved a yellowed tome and handed it to Mirabella as if presenting a treasure. "Take a look at this book."



The apprentice, returning with the tea leaves, caught sight of the book in Mirabella's hands, and his eyes widened in disbelief.

His mentor was sharing that precious volume with an outsider?! Wasn't it always treated like a prized possession?

The apprentice couldn't help but shift his gaze back to Mirabella. Who exactly was this young woman to command such respect from his venerable mentor?

Mirabella only flipped through the first few pages before putting the book down.

Nikolai, stroking his beard, asked, "Why did you stop reading?"

With a touch to her forehead, Mirabella spoke with a hint of impatience, "These are

just incomplete formulas, hardly worth the read." She had thought to call them rubbish but held back, not wanting to offend him. He was an elderly man, after all. What if he took it badly?

Upon hearing her words, a realization flashed across Nikolai's eyes. After a moment, he confessed, "Truth be told, this book has been handed down from the older generations. I've spent most of my life trying to decipher the concoctions to no avail."

Mirabella's expression grew complex. After a brief silence, she said, "An incomplete formula will only yield a defective remedy—ineffective and a waste of ingredients. It might be best to discard it."

The suggestion hung heavy in the air, leaving Nikolai momentarily dazed. To hear such advice from a top alchemist was profound. The book had been treasured for generations, only to be deemed worthless... No wonder he'd never managed to grasp the full recipes.

Sensing the impact of her words, Mirabella chose not to dwell on it any further. She stood up, "I should be going." She left swiftly, carrying her remedy with her.

It took a while for Nikolai to collect himself. His gaze fell upon the aged book on the table, and he let out a wry chuckle, "Truly, I've grown old." He picked up the book and

returned it to the drawer.

The apprentice, still holding the freshly brewed pot of tea, stood frozen as the guest departed. Turning to Nikolai, he asked, "Master, who exactly is this Mirabella?"

Nikolai looked at him but remained silent.

"Right, the girl visited us before. I mentioned to you that the ingredients she sought were quite peculiar, for making incense, I think..." the apprentice mumbled.

At that. Nikolai's eyes widened in sudden realization.

## Chapter 318

When Mirabella stepped out of Nikolai's shop, Nature's Apothecary, she decided to pick up some spices to round off her shopping spree. Just as she dropped the last packet into her tote, her cell buzzed in her pocket. It was James on the line.

"Alright, I'm at the corner. I'll be out in a sec." Mirabella slipped her phone back into her bag and soon left the bustling farmers' market. She spotted the sleek black sedan waiting at the curb almost immediately. Striding over, she pulled open the back door and gracefully slid into the

seat.

Wyatt, the driver, greeted her with increasing deference, "Good afternoon, Ms. Mirabella."

"Hello, Wyatt," she replied with a polite nod.

Turning to James, Mirabella noticed he seemed back to his usual self. A playful squint crossed her eyes as she teased, "You mentioned a tightness in your chest yesterday?"

Tightness in the chest? Wyatt glanced at them, puzzled. He hadn't heard James mention anything of the sort.

James, unflustered, gave a nonchalant hum and even feigned a cough while pressing his chest. "Just give me your hand," Mirabella instructed.

James extended his arm toward her. Mirabella shifted slightly toward the center seat and expertly placed her fingers on his pulse, her gaze softening.

James watched Mirabella's seriousness, a tranquil contrast to her easygoing demeanor. The cool touch on his wrist vanished, and her calm voice followed, "It's nothing serious."

He withdrew his hand. "Yeah, I thought it wasn't much. Sorry for the concern."

Mirabella settled back into her seat, waving off the matter. "No worries."

His gaze fell on the paper bag beside her. Feigning casual interest, he asked, "Whipping up some medicine again?"

"Something like that," Mirabella yawned, leaning against the car door. "Wake me up when we get to the diner."

"Sure thing."

Wyatt, upfront, instinctively eased off the accelerator. To him, Mirabella was now a figure of even greater importance than James. Her title as a top-tier apothecary would have the prominent families of Riverdale vying for her attention.

Rubbing his nose, he glanced in the rearview mirror, marveling at how James had the fortune to be acquainted with someone like Ms. Mirabella.

Half an hour later, they pulled up to the entrance of the diner. James turned to Mirabella, about

1/2

11:30

to wake her, but she was already stirring, her eyes still misty with sleep.

Rubbing her eyes, her voice raspy, she asked, "We there?"

"Yeah."

Mirabella glanced out the window and stepped out of the car. Soon, the trio made their way to a private booth on the second floor.

After ordering, the waiter left them to their privacy.

James poured a cup of tea for Mirabella with a deliberate slowness, noting the lingering signs of fatigue on her face. "Rough night?"

Propping her head on the table, she drawled, "It's okay, just adjusting my sleep schedule."

'Ms. Mirabella, I've been following your competitions. You're incredible," Wyatt couldn't help but interject, seizing the opportunity to butter her. up

Mirabella rolled her head toward him. "It was no biggie."

Wyatt's eyebrows twitched. He thought. 'Scoring perfect marks was no biggie? If she ever got serious, she'd obliterate every other high-achiever out there.'

At that moment, Mirabella's phone rang. She fished it out and stood up, walking to the doorway. before answering. "Hey, Dad..."

James' eyes followed her briefly before he returned to his cup, sipping the water quietly.

22

Chapter 319

Mirabella stepped outside the private dining room and squinted into the din of the restaurant. "How'd you know I was out grabbing a bite with friends?" she asked, her gaze inadvertently sweeping the area for any sign of Shawn.

Aside from the occasional hustle of the restaurant staff, there was no trace of Shawn.

"Oh, a buddy mentioned they saw you in the restaurant." Shawn's voice came through the phone, tinged with a hint of guilt.

One of Mirabella's eyebrows arched inquisitively. "Oh, really?"

"Yeah, yeah. Look, you keep enjoying your meal with your friends. I won't keep you, kiddo," Shawn said, ready to end the call.

"It's that tutor friend of mine," Mirabella shook her head, slipping in the explanation just before Shawn could hang up.

"The one who gave you those two boxes of fancy boffee beans?" Shawn paused his goodbye.

Mirabella hummed in confirmation.

“Good heavens, why didn’t you say so earlier? I’ve been meaning to take your tutor out for a meal to thank him.” Shawn exclaimed, surprised.

Mirabella glanced back at the private room, “No need, Dad. I reckon he’s too busy for that.”

“Nonsense! Next time you see him, set something up. We have to show our gratitude properly, especially since he’s been helping you with studies and even brought such a fine gift Shawn insisted

with earnest seriousness.

“We’ll talk about it later. We’re going to eat now,” Mirabella mumbled vaguely and quickly hung up the phone.

Taking someone out to eat just meant spending more money, right? Please, it was best if they didn’t.

Back in the private dining room, Mirabella had barely settled in her seat when her phone buzzed with a new message on Messenger. She glanced at it and pressed her fingers to her temples, feeling the onset of a headache.

Taking a deep breath, she looked up at James with a serious expression. “My dad wants to take you out for a meal, a little thank you for the tea you gave me. If you’re busy, I can just tell

him you can’t make it, okay?”

James’ lips twitched slightly.

“Cough, cough...” Wyatt, who had just taken a sip of his drink, nearly choked on it.

“I’m free tomorrow.” James finally replied.

Mirabella raised an eyebrow at him. “Well, I’m not, I have to go film a show tomorrow

“A show? What kind of show?” Wyatt asked, intrigued. James turned to her as well

“It’s called ‘Country Comfort, It’s a live-streamed show, Mirabella explained, giving it a casual plug.

Wyatt quickly pulled out his phone and searched for “Country Comfort, which brought up a slew of related content. He skimmed through the summary; a five-streamed show about families trying out

country living.

“Seems like a pretty novel concept,” Wyatt commented.

“If you’re free, you could check it out,” Mirabella said nonchalantly,

Wyatt nodded and scrolled down for more details. “But I don’t see your name listed here?”

Mirabella’s eyebrows went up. “It’ll be there tomorrow.”

“Alright then, what time does it start?” Wyatt inquired.

“Should be around ten,” Mirabella recalled Collins mentioning it to her

Wyatt made a note of the time and then downloaded an app, where the show would be streamed the next day.

Soon after, the server brought their meals to the table.

After a satisfying dinner, Wyatt went to settle the bill. As he handed over his card and the check to the cashier, he noticed the staff member's demeanor change as they glanced at the room number. Standing up, the cashier addressed him with exceptional politeness. "Good evening, sir. Your bill for the private dining room has already been taken care of."

## Chapter 320

The cashier just shook her head with a smile. "The bill's already been taken care of."

Seeing this, Wyatt didn't press further. With a puzzled frown, he pocketed his card and headed back to the private dining room.

Upon his return, Wyatt noticed Mirabella was absent. He asked casually. "Where's Ms. Mirabella?"

"Bathroom," James replied, barely glancing at Wyatt, his tone disinterested.

Wyatt paused, a thought crossing his mind. Could Ms. Mirabella have settled the bill? But hadn't she been in the room the whole time?

"What's up?" James inquired, noticing Wyatt's perplexed expression.

Scratching his head, Wyatt admitted, "I went to pay, but the cashier said someone had already covered it."

He hesitated before adding, "Maybe Ms. Mirabella sorted it out."

James tapped his fingers on the tabletop but didn't respond.

Shortly, Mirabella returned to the room. She caught the odd looks from James and Wyatt and asked curiously, "What's with the faces?"



“Nothing.” Wyatt replied quickly, determined not to admit that he and James had almost freeloaded a meal. That would be too embarrassing to share.

After lunch, Mirabella parted ways with James and headed straight home. She brought back all the herbs and spices she had purchased and spent the afternoon in her room crafting scents.

After dinner, she went back upstairs to check on her creations. They were perfectly set and dry. She carefully cut them into pieces and packed them into three boxes. Nick and Catherine would each receive one, while the third one was for home use.

Mirabella had just placed the spare box in the storage cabinet downstairs when her eagle-eyed brother, Zach, spotted it. “Did you make more incense?” he asked excitedly.

“Yeah, want one?” Mirabella pulled the box back out.

“Sure,” Zach nodded eagerly.

Opening the box, Mirabella handed him just a single stick. Holding it, Zach glanced at the box with at least twenty sticks. “Only one for me?”

Mirabella looked up at Zach and suddenly remembered the three huge boxes of school papers still in transit. Her mood soured instantly. “You think one’s too few? Then you don’t need any.”

Zach quickly hid the incense stick behind his back. “No, I misspoke.” Mirabella’s moods could

1/2

flip so quickly all he had wanted was just one more stick,

With a snap, Mirabella closed the box and, right in front of him, locked it away in the

before turning to leave,

Zach watched her ascend the stairs, confused, pushing up his glasses without a clue as to how he had managed to upset her.

The next morning, Mirabella was up bright and early. The studio "Country Comfort was going to be shot wasn't in Ashford but in a smaller town called Harmony Point within its county. It was a good two-hour drive away. The call time was ten in the morning, so they needed to arrive at the set before then.

Collins was already waiting downstairs. In no time, Mirabella and Leo, each with a small suitcase, took the elevator down. Once their luggage was stowed, they climbed into the car. ready for the journey to Harmony Point.

On the road, Collins glanced in the rearview mirror and couldn't help but comment. "You really planning on staying behind the scenes for the show?"

Mirabella leaned back in her seat, a lazy ponytail draped over her shoulders, and lifted her eyelids slightly. "Yep."

"If you'd join me in showbiz with that face of yours, you'd be a sensation, Collins lamented, not for the first time, But Mirabella seemed entirely disinterested in the limelight.

Such a waste of a pretty face.