

The Double 371

Chapter 371

After dinner, Mirabella and Leo left Herb & Hearth, and by the time they got home, it was well past ten o'clock.

Delilah and Shawn had already retreated to their rooms, leaving only Zach lounging in the living room. Upon seeing the pair, his eyes lit up with a touch of playful annoyance. "Oh, look who decided to show up!" His tone was laced with an unmistakable edge.

Mirabella cast him a nonchalant glance.

Zach was taken aback, his inner monologue screaming, 'So they waltz in late and act all high and mighty!'

"Zach, we just went out for a bite," Leo interjected, trying to smooth things over.

Zach let out a sarcastic chuckle. "What's wrong with the food here at home?"

Leo fell silent. After spending some time around Zach, he was all too familiar with his brother's penchant for hidden barbs whenever jealousy struck.

Changing the subject, Zach's playful facade dropped, and his expression grew serious. "So, Leo, what's the deal with the stuff blowing up online?"

Leo's lips curled into a wry smile as he spoke with casual resignation, "Someone's trying

to frame me."

As Mirabella poured herself a glass of water, she leaned casually against the kitchen counter, her eyes slightly narrowed, taking a leisurely sip.

Zach's brows knitted together in concern. "I've already set the legal team on drafting a cease and desist. Don't worry about it." He knew his brother better than anyone. Accusations of Leo stealing songs from his team were absurd.

"Thanks, Zach," Leo replied, appreciative.

Zach waved it off and probed further, "How did your music end up in that guy's hands, anyway? Did one of your assistants get bought out?"

Leo thought of the complete audio in Jay's possession and the unfinished demo he had just completed that afternoon. He sighed heavily, "No, my song's still with me."

Zach's confusion deepened. "Then where did that version online come from?"

Leo shook his head. "I don't know. I just finished the song this afternoon, and no one else has been involved. The final product and the audio Jay had yesterday are almost identical, which... surprises me."

Zach frowned. "A case of parallel creation?"

"Seems like it. Otherwise, I can't explain why the melodies would be exactly the same," Leo

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admitted, though he found it hard to believe despite the evidence,

In that case, it's a bit tricky, but no worries, a fake can never become the real thing." Zach said confidently, having never lost a legal battle. Authenticity could be proven with professional analysis and forensic musicology. It would just take some time.

"I'm certain Jay couldn't have produced my song, not even if he had my draft. It couldn't be identical to mine," Leo stated with conviction.

Every artist had a unique style, and it was not something that could be simply copied.

Zach nodded in agreement. "I believe you."

Mirabella quietly listened as they talked. After finishing the last sip of water from her glass, she stood up straight and said, "Zach, Leo, you two should get some rest. I'm heading upstairs."

Soon after, Mirabella returned to her room. She booted up her laptop, and her fingers danced across the keyboard. Fifteen minutes later, she shut the computer, grabbed a set of pajamas from her wardrobe, and headed into the bathroom.

In the dead of night, a tweet titled "The Truth You've Been Waiting For" swept across major social platforms, causing widespread server slowdowns and forcing IT staff to work overtime to restore service. The digital landscape was abuzz with the drama unfolding in

real-time.

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The Unvarnished Truth is Here] The Tweet came from a blogger with the handle SeriousBusinessIsNoFun, an account with no tweet history, freshly registered today. Clearly, it was a burner account.

The Tweet was blunt in its simplicity, attaching only an audio clip and tagging Jay and Summer directly. The recording contained the exact conversation between Summer and Jay from a previous phone call.

"Your brother came knocking, asking me how I got the tune."

"The tune was always yours. What are you afraid of?"

"I'm really curious. How did you come by this tune, exactly?"

“You don’t need to know the details. The finished track is in your hands. Even if he wants to defend himself, he’s got no proof.”

The clarity of the recording was impeccable, devoid of any background noise, making Summer and Jay’s voices unmistakably recognizable.

Once the netizens digested the conversation, there was an uproar, especially with the words “your brother’ shattering everyone’s moral compass.

[Holy smokes, Summer is Juztin’s sister? His own sister lifted his tunes to give to someone else, then tried to drag him down?]

[What kind of stunt is this?]

[Hold up.

didn’t Juztin bring his sister on the reality show? Was Summer the sister he brought on the show? Doesn’t seem right!]

[Clearly, there’s a world of difference in their vibes. The sister on the show is cool and assertive, while Summer comes off as coy and pretentious. If she really is Juztin’s sister, why do they seem as different as night and day?]

[I used to think Summer was decent, gentle, kind, and a brainy genius. After hearing this recording, all I can say is, she’s trash!]

[My guess is that Summer just knows Juztin. He went on a live show without her, taking his current sister instead, so she harbored a grudge, stole Juztin’s new song, and gave it to Jay, aiming for some payback.]

[Such an evil woman!]

[Jay's no better, thieving Juztin's song and then smearing him. Shameless to the core!]

[Let the internet rain down its disdain on this despicable duo. They're treating us netizens

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like fools.]

In no time, the comment section under Summer and Jay's Twitter handles exploded.

Jay was still in the studio, crafting his music, his phone on silent, oblivious to the countless calls from his manager and assistant. It wasn't until the studio door burst open that he looked up, surprised.

He saw his agent, Vicky, at the door and casually removed his headphones. "Vicky, what brings you here so late?"

After Jay spoke, he noticed Vicky's grim expression and felt a premonition of doom, asking, "Did something happen?"

Vicky advanced, his gaze both icy and heavy.

"You haven't checked Twitter?"

Jay paused momentarily, then quickly responded, "No, I've been focused on my music, phone on silent."

"Then go check now," Vicky said, his voice devoid of warmth. He was seething internally. He just heard that phone recording on Twitter, and realized just how naive Jay could be. To steal a song was one thing, but to be caught on a recorded call? Unthinkable.

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Under Vicky's icy glare, Jay's hands trembled as he reached for the cellphone resting on the table. He opened Twitter, quickly navigating to his own damning tweet.

The moment the recording played, Jay felt like all the strength had been siphoned from his body. The phone slipped from his grasp, clattering onto the table. Only two words flashed through his mind. "It's over!"

Vicky massaged his temples, exasperation lacing his tone, "How could you be so naive? Haven't you learned that there are some things you just don't discuss over the phone?"

Jay's complexion was ashen. "I... I didn't think it through."

"And to think I've been backing you all this time. You've just torched your own future," Vicky said gravely.

Hearing this, Jay staggered, and then, coming to his senses, he seized Vicky's arm in desperation. "I didn't know it would come to this. You have to help me figure out what to

do..."

Vicky withdrew his arm. "When you blasted that tweet out, did you even think to run it by me? Can't you differentiate right from wrong on your own?"

"It was Justin's sister. She led me astray. She promised it would be fine," Jay murmured, trying to deflect the blame.

Vicky scoffed, "Promises? And what exactly did she guarantee for you? She was playing you like a fiddle to get at Leo. You were just a pawn in her game."

Jay wiped his face, his usually suave features now marred by confusion and panic. If he had known tonight's disaster was brewing, he never would have risked releasing that

track.

Vicky sighed heavily. After all, Jay was his protégé. “Jay, you’re too impulsive. Didn’t I tell you that you’d eventually lead Neon Paradox? I advised you to be patient. Why couldn’t you wait?”

Jay opened his mouth to speak but hesitated. Could he admit his envy and dread at watching Leo’s rising fame after the variety show appearance? Could he confess his eagerness to see his rival fall from grace?

He couldn’t. Voicing such thoughts would only convince his manager of his pettiness.

Vicky shook his head, rubbing his temples wearily. “Right now, you need to tweet an apology. Blame it all on Summer.

He had listened to the recording carefully and seen the comments on Twitter. While Jay was getting a severe backlash from fans, the majority were pointing fingers at Summer. So, it was time to push all the blame her way.

A temporary smudge on his reputation didn’t matter. Time would heal, and the showbiz

world was no stranger to scandals. This would be fuss died down and

old news once the

new gossip emerged. Despite Jay’s rashness, his talent was redeemable, though it was a shame with the groundwork Vicky had laid for him.

Jay perked up when he realized his manager hadn’t given up on him. “I’ll post the apology right away.”

“Remember,” Vicky instructed, “make it clear you were misled and that you’re a victim too.”

Jay glanced at Vicky, a cold resolve flickering in his eyes. "Understood." If Summer planned to cross him, he would make sure she wouldn't get off easily.

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Summer had barely settled into bed when her phone erupted into a symphony of urgent pings and rings. Frowning, she rubbed her sleepy eyes and grabbed her phone from the nightstand. It was her agent, Craig, and she hesitated for a moment before answering. "Craig?"

On the other end, Craig was fuming. "Summer, have you lost your mind? Why on earth did you leak your brother's new song to Jay?"

Jolted awake by his words, Summer stammered, "Craig, what are you talking about? Leak my brother's new song?"

Pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration, Craig spat out, "Just check Twitter. Your conversation with Jay has been recorded and leaked. Tonight, you're the top trending disaster." Without another word, Craig hung up.

Craig had thought Summer a clever and savvy artist, but this blunder made him doubt his own judgment. He wondered if she and Justin were really siblings, cuz no true sibling would sabotage another's future like this.

Stunned by the dial tone, Summer took two seconds before frantically opening Twitter. Eight of the top ten trending topics were about her and Jay.

Clicking on the link titled "The Truth You've Been Waiting For," she listened to the clear recording of her conversation with Jay, and her world stopped. Someone had been eavesdropping.

Panicking, she tried to call Craig back, but he wasn't picking up. "How could this have been recorded?" she muttered to herself. The evening had passed without incident, and even Leo was nowhere to be found, not daring to come out and discuss Jay's new song.

In just a few hours, everything had exploded. It had to be Jay. He must have recorded their conversation; no one else could have.

Summer attempted to call Jay, but her calls wouldn't go through. She'd been blocked.

Scrolling through Twitter, she found Jay's apology tweet. It painted him as the innocent victim, manipulated and used by her. He shifted all the blame onto Summer.

Summer bit her lip in disbelief. How could Jay do this to her?

The direct messages and the comments below her tweets were all calling for her to be canceled.

Summer collapsed on her bed, her face drained of color and her hands trembling. She felt choked by the weight of the situation.

Why had everything gone so wrong?

After a sleepless night, Summer trudged downstairs, her face haggard. But as she stepped into the living room, she was met with the stern face of Mandy, her mother. Before she could even utter "Mom," a sharp slap resounded across her cheek.

"Look at the mess you've made. The internet is plastered with your scandal!" Mandy trembled with rage.

She had woken up to calls from the socialite circle, their voices dripping with mockery as they spoke of her daughter's public disgrace.

Summer, hand to her stinging cheek, stared at her mother in disbelief. The internet was against her, her career in tatters, and instead of concern, her mother's first reaction was to slap her as though she'd

committed an unforgivable sin.

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I've poured my heart into raising you, and you go and do something that drags the Gilbert family name through the mud. How could you do this to me?" Mandy's face was raging. Like thunder as she berated her daughter, her voice heavy with disappointment.

Summer's lips twitched into a faint, wry smile. "What have I done? I'm a victim here, too, Mom. Can't you at least try to get the full story before you jump to conclusions?"

"You said to someone over the phone last night that everything was under control, and now it turns out you were planning something evil again," Aiden interjected, shaking his head in disbelief as he approached.

Summer shot Aiden a frosty glance, knowing full well that her mother's fury had something to do with her meddling brother.

At that moment, Mandy's voice carried through the tension. "If I hadn't figured out what was going on, I wouldn't have slapped you earlier. Your phone conversation with that person is all over the internet now. How do you plan to explain that? The Gilbert family's reputation is in tatters because of you. What's your excuse?"

Summer pressed her lips together tightly, her hands clenching at her sides. Reputation, reputation—it was always about reputation with her mother. In her mother's eyes, nothing and no one could ever trump the family's image.

"If you've already made up your mind about what happened online, why bother asking me at all? What difference does it make?" Summer said with a light chuckle, masking the hurt. "What kind of attitude is that?" Mandy frowned.

Summer remained silent, her eyes downcast, the imprint of her mother's hand vivid on her cheek. Her face, already worn thin from stress, looked even more pitiful under the mark of

violence.

Mandy watched her daughter quietly for a moment before relenting. "Enough. Have your agency take care of the mess online. We can't have the Gilbert family's name tarnished because of this." With that, Mandy turned and left. She didn't want to walk into her office and face whispers about having a daughter with such spiteful intentions.

Summer watched her mother's retreating figure, the chill in her eyes deepening. She soon pulled her gaze away and fixed it on Aiden. "Are you satisfied now?"

Aiden frowned. "This is your own doing. What does it have to do with me?" If she didn't keep stirring up trouble, there wouldn't be any scandalous headlines online.

Summer gave him a blank look and walked towards the mansion's grand entrance.

Meanwhile, Leo had just woken up to find several missed calls on his phone, all from Collins. Puzzled, he dialed one back. The call connected quickly.

"Collins? Were you trying to reach me about something urgent last night?"

Collins was seated in front of his computer, his face weary from a night with little sleep but still alert. "Have you checked Twitter in the past couple of days?"

Hearing this, Leo immediately understood what he was referring to. "Yeah, I'm aware of what's going on Twitter," he responded.

Collins raised an eyebrow. "Ah, so you know already?" He had thought Leo might have missed the viral truth bomb on Twitter the night before.

Leo walked over to the floor-to-ceiling windows and drew the curtains. "Yeah, Zach's already got people drafting a legal notice."

"I hope the legal notice is for Jay. The malicious slander, followed by an apology online claiming he was misled and trying to come off like a victim—it's just disgusting." After a pause, Collins snorted. "Does he think his useless apologies were enough?"

“Exactly, that’s why I don’t intend to—wait, Collins, what apology?” Leo asked, sounding confused.

What apology? Misled by whom? It seemed like they were not talking about the same incident.

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“Jay’s apology?” Collins raked his fingers through his disheveled hair. “What did you think? Weren’t you going on about drafting a cease and desist?”

“Uh... Jay’s apology? Why would he need to apologize?” Leo’s confusion was growing by the second.

“You didn’t check Twitter last night, did you?” Collins asked, his surprise evident.

“Nope, hit the hay early,” Leo admitted.

Alright then, Collins thought he had a handle on Leo’s bewildered response. “Jay admitted he got the track from your sister. She went behind your back and gave Jay your song, so she is the real villain trying to trash your rep online.”

After a brief pause, he added, “Don’t get it twisted. I mean your ex–sister, Summer.”

At that, Leo instinctively furrowed his brows. “You’re telling me that Summer gave that track to Jay?”

“That’s right.” Collins leaned back in his chair, crossing his legs with a nonchalant air. “Speaking of which, weren’t you two at each other’s throats? How’d your music end up in her hands?”

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“She didn’t steal it,” Leo said after a long silence. Even though he had little the Summer of his past, he wasn’t the type to slander someone without reason.

“No way, man. Go check the top trending post on Twitter. There’s an audio clip, Summer confessed,” Collins insisted, thinking Leo was just trying to protect Summer’s dignity.

Leo’s frown deepened. “I’ll have a look.”

“Good. Swing by the office later. We still gotta deal with this Jay mess,” said Collins.

“Got it.”

Leo ended the call quickly, pulled a chair up to his desk, and fired up Twitter. He found the tweet Collins had mentioned.

After listening to the audio clip, Leo was a mix of stunned and baffled. The track was indeed from Summer; there was no doubt about it.

So, the question was, how could the polished version she had be identical to the one he had finished later on? Leo felt goosebumps on his arms and a chill down his spine.

Shaking his head, Leo quickly–browsed the web for more info and checked out Jay’s apology post. His lips curled into a cold sneer.

If Jay had been upfront about his mistake, Leo might have thought Jay had some decency, but the guy had pushed all the blame onto Summer... This eagerness to wash

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'hands of gullt was a clear sign of a moral compass that had gone haywire.

Putting his phone away, Leo freshened up and went downstairs. In the dining room, the family was having breakfast. Leo joined them, pulling out a chair and sitting down.

With the Twitter fiasco on his mind, he was absentminded through breakfast, dropping his toast on the table twice.

Mirabella took a sip of her orange juice and glanced at him. "Leo?"

Hearing his sister's voice, Leo snapped out of his daze and nodded, "Yeah, what's up, Mirabella?"

"You look like you're on another planet," she said casually.

Leo's grip on his fork tightened, but he looked up at their parents seated across the table. Discussing Summer in front of them didn't seem right, so he simply shook his head. "Just didn't sleep well."

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Mirabella cocked an eyebrow but didn't call him out. After finishing the last sip of her milk, she stood up. "I'm done eating."

Shawn had also nearly finished his meal. He rose to his feet, "Let's go. I'll drop you off at school"

Soon, they were out the door.

Having finished her meal, Delilah retreated to her room to freshen up and get dressed. At the dining table, only Zach and Leo remained.

Leo lifted his gaze to his brother Zach and said, “Zach, someone tweeted an audio clip last night that cleared my name.”

Zach hadn’t checked Twitter, so at Leo’s words, he was taken aback. “What audio?” he asked, pulling out his smartphone and opening Twitter.

Hearing Summer’s voice emanating from the recording, Zach’s expression turned complex. He hadn’t anticipated his former sister would do something like this. Although he had felt uneasy about Summer’s eagerness to leave the Davis family, he had chalked it up to her vanity and the allure of her biological parents’ wealth. Eventually, he let it go.

He never imagined she would stoop so low as to use Leo’s reputation and future as weapons for revenge. If this recording had not come to light, the matter wouldn’t have settled so easily. Even if he had successfully defended Leo’s rights then, what about the damage done? This was no longer a matter of being pretentious or willful. It was a question of character.

“I can’t believe she turned out this way,” Zach sighed.

Leo knew exactly who ‘she’ was. His face remained impassive. “True colors.” The impulse to destroy what one cannot have—was the very nature of the Summer he knew.

“So, what are you planning to do?” Zach asked, raising an eyebrow.

Leo set down his half-finished breakfast sandwich, contemplating for a moment. “Everyone must face the consequences of their actions. She should have thought about that before doing what she did.”

“I see.” Zach fell silent, then added, “I think we should let Emmitt listen to the audio clip

online.”

Leo understood; after all, Emmitt and Summer had been close since childhood. If Summer tried to play the family card with Emmitt again, it would indeed affect everyone’s mood.

“I’ll stop by Emmitt’s office later, Leo said slowly.

“Okay.” After a pause, Zach added, “Mom and Dad aren’t really on Twitter, so there’s no

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need to let them in on this. It would be ironic, to say the least, for them to discover that the daughter they had cherished for over a decade had been scheming against their closest kin.

Leo nodded and then bowed his head, saying nothing more. As for why Summer had a piece of music identical to his, he’d address that once he had more clarity.

The school was abuzz with the scandal that had blown up online the night before involving Summer’s attempt to frame Juztin. As the only person in the class who knew Mirabella was Juztin’s sister, Jenna naturally didn’t let the opportunity to grill Summer

slide.

“How did your brother’s music end up in Summer’s hands?” Jenna had listened to the recording and felt Summer was being secretive, prompting Jenna to focus on this particular point.

Mirabella arched an eyebrow and glanced at her with a smirk. “Maybe she’s got superpowers?”

Jenna’s lips twitched. “Queen Mira, please take this seriously.”

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Mirabella straightened up, her voice steady and firm. “Do I look like I’m brushing you off? Jenna glared at her, thinking to herself, “You bet you are, and it’s big time!”

I honestly don't know," Mirabella said with a shrug, her hands spread wide in a gesture of innocent cluelessness.

"But seriously, I always thought Summer was a bit of a phony, but I never guessed she'd be so malicious. To take your brother's music and hand it over like it was hers, then have the gall to accuse him of being the thief?"

Jenna clicked her tongue in disapproval. "Thank goodness for that recording that surfaced. Without it, your brother would be up the creek without a paddle, tarnished reputation and all. I wonder which guardian angel pulled that one out of their hat. It's freaking impressive to dig up a recording like that."

Mirabella raised an eyebrow, a smug look crossing her face. "Perhaps that guardian angel is closer than you think."

Jenna laughed it off, not taking her seriously. "Queen Mira, you should be bowing down to that guardian angel. Thanks to them, your brother's future isn't going down the drain."

Mirabella just looked at her silently, choosing not to respond.

"Summer skipped school today," Jenna continued, "and after this scandal, I bet she'll be too embarrassed to ever show her face here again. It's a classic case of reaping what you sow."

Mirabella pondered for a moment. Given Summer's personality, she doubted embarrassment would keep her away from school for long.

During the last period of self-study that afternoon, Mirabella was engrossed in her work when Ms. Annette, called her out of the classroom. Once outside, Annette got straight to the point. "Mirabella, can I ask you something? Do you have two mothers?"

Mirabella looked puzzled. "Um?"

Annette had met Delilah before but was baffled by the arrival of another woman claiming to be Mirabella's mother. So she had asked the woman to wait in her office while she

checked with Mirabella.

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Clearing her throat, Annette continued, "There's a lady here who says she's your mother, with the last name Gilbert

Mirabella instantly understood. Her expression remained neutral as she replied, "That's my former foster mother."

Annette, noting Mirabella's cool demeanor, said, "She's waiting in my office. Do you want

to see her?"

After a brief moment of thought, Mirabella nodded. She knew Mandy was here about the Summer incident, and even if she refused to meet, Mandy would find another excuse to come knocking. It was better to deal with it once and for all.

Soon enough, Mirabella followed Annette to her office. Annette let Mirabella in and then made her way to the next office, reminding her that she could come and find her if anything was amiss. Mirabella thanked her and stepped into the office.

Mandy was sitting there, looking posh with her makeup on point, exuding a strong scent of perfume that filled the room. Her gaze upon seeing Mirabella was cool and detached.

Getting straight to the point, Mirabella asked, "What do you want?"

Mandy's brow furrowed at Mirabella's disrespectful tone. She stood up, her voice icy. "What, can't even call me Mom anymore?"

Mirabella's lips curled into a sly smile. "Ms. Mandy, have you forgotten? We already showed our true colors at the hospital last time, didn't we?"

Mandy was caught off guard by her foster daughter's boldness, and her expression darkened instantly. "Such an ill-mannered brat!"

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Mirabella crossed her arms, standing her ground with a piercing intensity in her eyes. Mandy's tough exterior seemed to crumble a bit under the weight of her gaze.

Fidgeting with her clutch, Mandy looked away with feigned disdain, clearing her throat, "I'm not going to mince words with you. That recording about Summer and someone else that's circulating online? It's a fabrication by someone with an agenda. Go tell your brother that we should put an end to this mess before it gets ugly."

It was only today that Mandy discovered that a celebrity was among the Davis family's sons. But from what she saw online, with his flashy appearance and pretty-boy vibe, he hardly seemed the serious artist type.

"Why would I do that?" Mirabella's lips curled into a casual smirk.

Mandy didn't care much for her foster daughter's attitude. She smoothed her wavy hair by her temples and spoke with detached calm, "For the sake of your brother's future, you better think this through." It was a blatant threat.

Mirabella just watched quietly.

Mandy glanced at her and continued, "By the way, your parents are just ordinary employees in the

online, I could any, right? If your brother just clears things up with a statement

online, I could arrange for your parents to work at a subsidiary of the Gilbert Corporation. As for their salary, it will certainly be higher than what they're earning now."

Mandy remembered how the Davis couple had pretended to be unimpressed when offered a check last time. Who knew if they were just being greedy, wanting more?

Mirabella thought about her parents' habit of transferring tens of thousands like it was pocket change and the so-called unlimited black card that remained untouched, and asked, "How high of a salary can you offer?"

Mandy's eyes immediately flashed with arrogance. After a few seconds of thought, she said, "Five..."

Mirabella raised an eyebrow, "Fifty thousand?"

Before Mandy could utter 'thousand, she was cut off.

Rubbing her chin, Mirabella added with apparent disdain, "Fifty thousand isn't much."

After all, the old man boasted that his quarterly bonuses could afford a million-dollar sports car. Fifty thousand for a salary was indeed not impressive.

Mandy was almost amused by the audacity. "Fifty thousand? Do you think we're running a charity?" Five thousand a month was already generous for an ordinary employee, yet here was Mirabella expecting fifty thousand?

you running?"

Choked by Mirabella's words, Mandy took a deep breath and managed, "Consider what I just said carefully. Your brother's future, your parents' jobs..."

Mirabella raised her hand. "Sorry, but I don't respond well to threats."

“You’re choosing to learn the hard way!” Mandy was losing patience.

Mirabella nodded, her voice light and breezy. “I’m so scared.”

Mandy’s brow furrowed. “You...”

Just then, Annette, who was waiting in the next office, decided to step in. She’d had a hunch that Mirabella’s foster mother was trouble. She stepped to the doorway and overheard the last few exchanges, including her student’s mockingly fearful reply.

Annette’s face darkened with disapproval. Mirabella was always such a well-behaved student, a child anyone would cherish and protect. And yet here was her foster mother, threatening her? This was crossing a line.

Annette entered the office, her expression stern, and interjected, “Ma’am, if there’s nothing else, please don’t disrupt the child’s education any further.”

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Mandy’s frown deepened as she was abruptly cut off. She glanced at Annette, whose stern expression suggested seriousness. Though Mandy felt a twinge of discomfort, she knew better than to cause a scene in front of others. Casting a final look at her foster daughter, she held her tongue and quickly exited the office.

Once alone, Annette’s severity softened. She walked over to Mirabella and gently patted her shoulder, offering comfort, “Mirabella, there’s no need to be scared. This is school, and your foster mother wouldn’t dare do anything to you here.”

Mirabella looked up at Annette, slightly sighing at the sight of Annette’s nurturing demeanor. She nodded obediently. “Yeah, thanks, Ms. Annette.”

“It’s no trouble at all. Remember, you can always talk to me if you’re facing any difficulties,” Annette said, her maternal instincts surging.

“If only I had a daughter as lovely as Mirabella to complement my son,” she thought, “it would be a dream come true.”

Mirabella simply smiled in response.

Glancing at her watch, Annette noted the time, “School’s almost out. You should head

back.”

“Okay.”

Mirabella returned to her classroom just before the dismissal bell rang. She packed the day’s unfinished assignments into her bag and then strolled out with her friend Jenna, unhurried.

Stepping out of the academic building, Mirabella checked her phone and saw a message from Delilah on Messenger.

Her mom was coming to pick her up, but traffic delays meant she hadn’t yet arrived at the school. She asked Mirabella to wait by the main entrance.

After leaving Annette’s office, Mandy made her way to see Morgan.

*Summer didn’t come to school today,” Morgan announced without looking up from the papers he was grading at his desk.

Following the fallout from the previous competition, Morgan had been stripped of his position as the head of the Prodigy Class and had lost his title as an outstanding teacher. Given this, his demeanor toward Mandy was notably cool.

Had it not been for the mess created by the Gilbert family, he wouldn’t be the laughingstock of the other teachers.

Mandy sensed Morgan's chilliness but figured he was just preoccupied with work. When he mentioned that her daughter hadn't come to school, she furrowed her brows in concern and asked, "She didn't?"

Morgan's lips twisted slightly. "Yeah, and if she doesn't want to come to school, she might as well take a leave of absence."

Mandy looked at him, slightly taken aback. "Mr. Morgan, that's not a very appropriate thing for a teacher to say, is it?"

After all, Summer was among the top performers in her grade. His attitude seemed almost as if he couldn't wait for her to leave the school.

Morgan paused, put down his pen, and finally looked up with an expressionless face. "Thanks to your family, I am no longer the head of the Prodigy Class."

Mandy, who hadn't paid much attention to the issues surrounding the previous competition, was momentarily confused, thinking it might have been due to the recording incident from the night before. She tried to explain, "Um... my daughter was a victim, too."

Morgan internally scoffed at the notion of victimhood. To sabotage someone and then play innocent – was that what was called being a victim?

Pressing his temples, he found the Gilbert family's values consistently astonishing. He didn't want to hear another word from Mandy, and said impatiently, "Sorry, but I'm quite busy and don't have time for small talk."

His intention to dismiss her was palpable.

The air filled with awkwardness as Mandy noted Morgan returning to his grading. Her

face stiffened, and without pressing further, she left the office with a cloud of frustration hanging over her.