

The Double 421

Chapter 421

The next day.

At school.

In Mr. Hammond's office.

"Mirabella," he began warmly, his eyes crinkling at the edges as he leaned against his desk. "I heard about the incident with that old man from Anthony. I've been swamped with the Math Olympiad prep, so I couldn't check in sooner. But I heard you handled it yourself. How's the situation now?"

Mirabella's fingers casually lingered on the edge of the desk. After yesterday's debacle, she felt more at ease. With her on the case, that swindler Donald wouldn't be making any waves. Besides, her parents had been acting all sorts of strange, almost as if they knew Donald.

Collecting her thoughts, Mirabella's eyes shone with the earnestness of a model student. "It's all taken care of," she replied succinctly.

Mr. Hammond chuckled at that. "I was about to roll up my sleeves and take a trip to the hospital myself if that man kept causing trouble."

Her eyebrows arched in mild surprise. "You never suspected that I might have actually hit the man?"

"I trust my students' integrity far more," Mr. Hammond declared without a hint of hesitation, chin lifted proudly.

Touching her nose thoughtfully, Mirabella said, "Thanks for believing in me. If there's nothing else, may I head back to class?"

“Hold up, there’s one more thing,” Mr. Hammond interjected, pulling out a registration form from his drawer. “This year’s Math Olympiad—you’re a star pupil at Parkside High. You simply must compete.”

He paused, then added with a significant tone, ‘This competition’s pivotal for securing the hosting rights for the next round. Parkside High has been on the bench for three years now, and we can’t let Eagle High from Silvermist Shores snatch it from us again.’

Eagle High was in Silvermist Shores and topped the national high school rankings, boasting superior staff and resources compared to Parkside High. Brimming with academic prodigies and known for its stringent rules and cutthroat competition, Eagle High’s survival-of-the-fittest ethos stood in stark contrast to Parkside High’s more nurturing approach.

Graduates from Eagle High carried a certain tenacity, a refusal to be bested. Last time, thanks to the BrainSpark Nationals, Parkside High had leaped from fifth to third in the

national rankings. Such a climb in the rankings meant the school rode the wave of

success, and naturally, other schools were loath to be overshadowed by Parkside High. The Math Olympiad was no longer just about hosting rights but a badge of prowess and prestige

Mirabella glanced at the registration form, then back to Mr. Hammond who seemed have pinned all his hopes on her. With a sigh, she said. “You’re not giving me much choice, are you?”

Mr. Hammond cleared his throat awkwardly. “Someone from Eagle High has thrown down the gauntlet, challenging you to a math showdown. Think of it as a casual pop quiz, will you?”

“Someone’s challenged me?” Mirabella asked genuinely surprised

“You’re the first in years to score full marks in an international competition” Mr. Hammond replied, his expression a mix of pride and exasperation. “What do you think?”

Mirabella nonchalantly admitted nodding “Well I know I’m pretty formidable

A twitch of feigned annoyance flickered across Mr. Hammond's face as he slapped the form onto the desk. "Just fill it out and get out of here Her cockiness was almost too much to bear.

As Mirabella picked up a pen and started to write her name, a thought struck her, and she looked up. "By the way, is there a cash prize for winning this Olympiad?"

Mr. Hammond just stared blankly for a moment. No cash prize, and suddenly the star student wasn't so keen?

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After signing up for the Math Olympiad, Mirabella left Mr. Hammond's office with a hefty stack of past math papers he had casually thrust into her hands.

She already had two boxes brimming with study materials and exam papers at home. Now, with Mr. Hammond's contribution, Mirabella returned to the classroom with a look of dismay etched across her face.

"What did the teacher call you to the office for this time? Was it about that con artist?" Jenna eyed Mirabella with concern.

Distracted by the heap of papers in her hands, Mirabella didn't answer Jenna's question. Instead, she asked, "What's your top choice for college?"

Jenna let out an "Ah," before responding, "I'm aiming for Radiant Ridge College right here. in our city."

Radiant Ridge College was the local academic crown jewel with no easy entry requirements, but it certainly couldn't hold a candle to the likes of Prestige College.

Mirabella's fingers caressed the stack of papers she had just hauled back, casting a sidelong glance at Jenna. "Is that the extent of your ambition?"

Rolling her eyes, Jenna retorted, “Not everyone’s a genius freak like you, Mira. I mean, sure, I’d love to get into Prestige College or Apex University, but I’ve got to be realistic. I’m not even sure I can get into Radiant Ridge.”

After pondering for a couple of seconds, Mirabella asked, “Have you heard about the Math Olympiad?”

Jenna nodded. “Yeah, I know about it. It happens every year around this time, right? What

about it?”

“If you snag a good ranking, it could really boost your college application,” Mirabella said earnestly.

Results from such nationwide competitions could be gold on a student’s resume and significantly increase their chances of getting into a prestigious university.

“Queen Mira, stop kidding around. I’m a total math disaster. I’m lucky if I pass, let alone compete in an Olympiad,” Jenna quickly dismissed the idea with a wave of her hand.

Mirabella gave her a look. “Your math’s not bad; you just don’t focus.” After all, she couldn’t let these piles of papers go to waste.

“No, no, no, I’m just an average Joe with no grand aspirations...”

Before she could finish, Mirabella cut her off, “I’ve already signed you up.

Jenna’s smile froze, “What?!!!”

“These are math papers I specially requested from the teachers. Take them and work on them. We’ve got a few days before the Olympiad, and you can ask me if there’s anything you don’t understand.” Mirabella deposited the entire pile onto Jenna’s desk, which was the very picture of generosity.

Jenna's eyes landed on the mountain of exam papers—at least twenty at a glance—and she almost fainted on the spot. Once she had regained her composure, she said, “No, I’m going to get my name off that list right now.” Shaking, she clutched the papers and made to leave.

Mirabella pursed her lips into a sly smile. “I signed you up with Mr. Hammond.”

Jenna staggered, steadied herself, and swung around in shock. “Mira, I seriously suspect you’re out for revenge.”

Mr. Hammond was intimidating! Jenna didn’t have the nerve to confront him about removing her name.

Raising an eyebrow, Mirabella stated, “I’m doing this for your own good.”

Jenna was flabbergasted. Mirabella was the devil in disguise.

“Besides, with me tutoring you, what’s there to fear from a simple test?”

Jenna let out a weary chuckle, too drained to argue. Resigned, she slumped back into her seat, accepting her fate.

Mirabella spared her a glance, then pulled out her phone and sent a message to Mr. Hammond.

When Mirabella got home after school, she scanned the

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In the kitchen, Delilah was bustling about when Mirabella strolled in and casually asked, “Mom, did Donald leave?”

Without turning around and without correcting her daughter's informal address, Delilah responded, "He must've caught a chill last night. He's been under the weather all day. He just took some medicine and went back to his room to rest."

Mirabella frowned upon hearing this. What was this old con artist up to now?

"I'm going to check on him," Mirabella declared.

With a wave of her hand, Delilah said, "Go ahead."

Swiftly, Mirabella climbed the stairs. The guest room door was unlocked. She turned the doorknob, pushed the door open, and stepped inside.

The room was draped in darkness, curtains pulled tight, void of any sliver of light, stale and stuffy. Flicking on the chandelier, Mirabella's gaze settled on the bed, pausing for a moment before she approached. There lay Donald, eyes closed, complexion not quite right.

Was he actually sick?

Donald was not deeply asleep, just lethargic. Slowly, his eyes fluttered open to find Mirabella staring intently at him. With little energy, he murmured, "What, happy to see me laid up sick?"

Mirabella shot him a look. "You've got enough strength to talk, so you can't be that bad

off."

At that, Donald felt his head spin even more. "You're heartless."

"Oh, a heart's not required for dealing with a professional scammer like you," Mirabella retorted, her voice as cool as ever.

Donald just pulled the covers over his head. "Get out, will you? Don't make my illness—or my irritation—worse. I might end up never leaving your place."

Shaking her head in disbelief, Mirabella walked over to the window and shoved it open. Fresh air rushed in, dispelling the oppressive atmosphere.

Donald peeked out from under the blanket, and seeing Mirabella hadn't left, he felt a reluctant sense of relief, though he still grumbled, "Why are you still here?"

Mirabella returned to the bedside and, ignoring his complaints, reached out and grasped his wrist, which was resting atop the blanket.

"What are you doing?" Donald recoiled at her sudden move, instinctively trying to jerk his hand away, but froze under her piercing gaze, a reluctant submission taking hold of him.

Silenced, he didn't dare to move.

Inside, Donald was frustrated. Mirabella actually intimidated him.

Mirabella released his wrist and said with a hint of amusement, "Anxiety, chest tightness, overall weakness... textbook case of not adjusting to the new environment well. Donald, where are you from?"

Donald quickly tucked his hand back under the covers. He couldn't say whether he was feeling uneasy about the new environment or not, but... "How did you know I was feeling anxious and weak?"

She glanced at him, "I know what I need to know."

Just a pinch, and she'd assessed his condition. Donald's eyes widened. "You can take a pulse?"

"I've got a few tricks up my sleeve, especially when it comes to throwing punches. Care to test that theory?" Mirabella flexed her fist lightly, her tone breezy.

Donald was speechless. See? That was a clear-cut threat.

She's such a cute girl, yet so utterly charmless!

When Mirabella saw that Donald clammed up, she let out a soft chuckle and didn't linger turning to leave.

As she walked away, Donald felt an unexpected twinge of disappointment and called out to her retreating figure, "Hey, you heartless thing, you're just going to leave me like this?"

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Mirabella paused in her tracks, turning her head back to shoot a look at him. "Donald, my family taking you in is charity enough. Don't push your luck."

Donald huffed angrily, yanking the blanket over his head. Seriously, what kind of person talked like that?!

He should have never asked.

Shaking her head, Mirabella decided not to deal with him anymore and quickly left the

room.

As she descended the staircase, Delilah had already finished preparing dinner and laid it out on the dining table. She glanced at her daughter and asked, "Did you check on Donald? Is he sleeping now? I made him some chicken soup. If he's awake, I can take a bowl up to him now."

Mirabella nodded, pulling out a chair to sit. "No need. I'll take it up after we eat."

"Alright then," Delilah replied softly, pausing before adding, "Take good care of him, okay?"

Mirabella gave her a look upon hearing that.

After dinner, Mirabella took a bowl of chicken soup and a plate of steamed greens upstairs, pushing open the door to enter.

She placed the items on the nightstand, noting that Donald's eyes were closed, feigning sleep. She arched an eyebrow. Of course, if one ignored his uneven breathing, they might actually believe he was asleep.

"Alright, quit faking. Get up and eat something," Mirabella said slowly, breaking the silence. of the room.

Donald didn't move on the bed, as if he hadn't heard a thing.

Mirabella didn't say another word and instead pulled up a chair, slouching into it lazily as she fished out her phone.

A message popped up on Messenger. It was from Collins, Leo's agent.m[Hey Mira, I've got the sports brand endorsement deal sorted out.]

Seeing the message, Mirabella's eyes lit up. She crossed her legs, looking every bit the rebel, and typed back. [Awesome, Collins. Thanks for the hustle.]

Collins, who was at a diner with Leo, saw Mirabella's reply as soon as his phone buzzed on the table. After reading it, he quickly responded. [No problem.]

He then looked up at Leo, who was busy munching on his meal and sent another message. [By the way, I haven't mentioned to your brother about snagging the ad deal.]

Over time, Collins had noticed a particular quirk. Whenever it came to Mirabella doing something like accepting an ad deal, Leo was quick to refuse, almost obsessively protective to an abnormal degree.

Mirabella, squinting slightly, typed back leisurely. [Don't worry, he doesn't have the right to refuse.]

With that response, Collins felt reassured. Even though Leo was overly protective, he was also a bit of a pushover, especially where his sister was concerned, with no real standing as the older brother.

Leo looked up, noticing Collins chuckling darkly at his phone, and narrowed his eyes. "Collins?"

Clearing his throat, Collins set down the phone and said nonchalantly, 'Oh, I forgot to tell you, when I dropped off that autograph for your sister the other day, I casually brought up the ad deal, and she was interested.'

Leo's brow furrowed. "Didn't we already turn down that ad deal?"

"Yeah, we did, but it seems your sister was quite keen, so I chased it back down," Collins explained calmly.

Leo shot him a skeptical look. "My sister was interested? You must have nagged her into it."

Collins' lips twitched, and then he simply picked up his phone, unlocked it, pulled up his recent Messenger chat with Mirabella, and handed

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Leo grabbed his phone, thumbing through the chat history with a sense of unease. The message [Don't worry, he doesn't have the right to refuse] sent a chill down his spine. That menacing vibe... No way his sister would talk like that.

This couldn't be her messaging on Messenger. His sister was never this aggressive.

With an involuntary flick of his finger, Leo scrolled up through more messages and realized Collins had been chatting with his sister way too often. Even though their conversations were brief, they rubbed him the wrong way. His sister rarely ever chatted with him on Messenger.

Leo grimaced, lifted his gaze, and eyed Collins. "You've been in touch with my sister a lot, huh?"

"Huh?" Collins seemed confused by his question.

"Never mind." Leo's eyes returned to the phone screen.

His fingers tapped swiftly, navigating to his sister's contact page. He hit a button in the top right corner and, in the pop-up that appeared, checked 'Add to block list.' A moment later, Leo handed the phone back to Collins, who placed it casually on the nearby table without checking it again.

Leo picked up his fork and resumed eating. Between bites, he casually asked, "When are we shooting the commercial?"

"Next week, we're set to sign the contract; we'll schedule the shoot after that," replied Collins.

"Alright, got it," Leo responded lightly.

"Once we wrap the music video tomorrow, we're heading back to Ashford. Your flight's already booked. Take some rest when you get back, you've got an episode of 'Country Comfort' to shoot the day after tomorrow," Collins added, laying out the next couple of days' itinerary.

"Mhm."

When Mirabella was messaging Collins, Donald, who had been feigning sleep, couldn't keep up the act any longer. He opened his eyes, filled with a silent reproach.

Just a couple more calls for attention. Would that kill her? Seriously.

Mirabella chose to ignore his gaze, her attention locked on her phone, exuding a carefree and rebellious air.

Donald's stomach growled from a day of scarce eating. Despite being peeved at

Mirabella's icy demeanor, he reached for the bowl of soup on the nightstand and started

to eat

After finishing the soup, Donald set the bowl down with a huff and called out, "I'm still hungry. Got any more?"

Mirabella glanced at Donald lazily, wordlessly stood up, pocketed her phone, and took the bowl to get more soup.

Donald took a deep breath. Even in his younger days, he'd never been so audacious. Mirabella was really... It was better not to think about it. It only aggravated him more.

So, Donald pulled out his phone from under the pillow, held down the power button, and as soon as it booted up, he sent a text out. [Blind as a bat!]

The Message was sent, and he swiftly turned the device off again.

Next door, James received the baffling text. Had Grandpa Donald lost his mind?!

After Mirabella returned downstairs, she ladled another bowl of steaming soup. As she was about to head back up, a thought struck her, and she turned to walk back to the living

then room. She pulled out an incense stick and a small burner from the cabinet, ascended the stairs once more.

Back in the room, she placed the fresh soup on the nightstand without a word to Donald.

Donald seemed to have grown accustomed to her silence and continued eating. However, he caught a glimpse of the incense burner and stick in her hand.

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Donald raised an eyebrow, his curiosity piqued as he inquired, "What's that incense you've got there? Sandalwood or Agarwood?"

"Sandalwood," Mirabella replied without looking up, setting the incense burner on the low coffee table and flicking her lighter to life, igniting the incense.

As the incense began to burn, a subtle fragrance soon filled the room. On closer whiff, the aromatic afternotes hinted at medicinal herbs, inexplicably comforting to the senses.

Donald was no stranger to the ritual of burning incense, being a connoisseur of top-shelf aromatics himself. Thus, the scent wafting from Mirabella's incense took him by surprise. "This incense... seems to have a blend of herbs, doesn't it?" After pausing for a couple of seconds and taking another sniff, his astonishment was evident. "This is some quality stuff you've got here."

With a quirk of her eyebrow, Mirabella cast a glance at Donald sprawled on the bed. "Not too shabby in the recognition department, eh? And here you were, playing the country bumpkin. Hmm?"

Donald quietly sipped his broth again before probing, "Where did you get this incense? It's the most comforting scent I've smelled in years."

"Got it online, nine bucks, free shipping. Interested?" Mirabella tossed off the comment casually.

A twitch tugged at the corner of Donald's mouth as he set his bowl on the nightstand, his tone less than amused. "Who are you trying to fool? If that incense is really nine bucks, I'll eat my hat."

“Your hat isn’t worth much,” Mirabella retorted with a dismissive twist of her lips.

Donald was taken aback. He thought, “Believe it or not. My real identity might just knock your socks off!”

After clearing away the dishes, Mirabella added, “Consider yourself lucky, Donald, that I even bothered to light an incense for you.”

She hadn’t planned on pampering him with such a luxury, but after her mother’s mysterious advice to ‘take good care of him,’ she grudgingly complied. Judging from Donald’s praise of her incense, she could deduce he wasn’t your average Joe. As for his real identity, she wasn’t interested in guessing— nor did she have the time to spare.

“What do you mean, ‘lucky?’ It’s just nine bucks, right? Here, I’ll give you ninety–nine for a box,” Donald retorted, clearly ruffled by her words. Wherever he went, he was accustomed to adulation. Only in the presence of this young girl did his dignity seem to be slipping. away! He resolved to find the perfect moment to turn the tables on her, to show her that

some people should not be underestimated!

Mirabella simply gave him a look. Ninety–nine bucks for her incense? Moments ago, she thought he had a discerning taste, but now... well, he was just a penny–pinching old man.

“You should probably just get some sleep,” she advised. With that, Mirabella exited with the bowl in hand, deliberately closing the door with a bit more force than necessary.

Donald touched his chin, perplexed. They were just having a decent conversation, so what’s with this sudden cold shoulder? Youth these days were so fickle, so impatient!

With a huff, he settled back into bed, pulling the covers up and closing his eyes.

Adapting to a new environment was one thing, but his preference for his own bed was another; a restless night had left him drained and under the weather. Now, lulled by the soothing scent, his mind quieted, and he drifted off into a peaceful slumber.

The next day, Donald awoke feeling exceptionally refreshed. Yesterday's discomfort was gone without a trace.

As he got out of bed, he noticed the incense ash in the burner on the coffee table and pondered for a moment. Soon after, he freshened up and, with the aid of his cane, stepped out of the room.

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Donald had just reached the bottom of the stairs when Delilah and Shawn approached him with concern, inquiring about his health.

It was Saturday, a day without classes, so Mirabella was lounging on the sofa, idly scrolling through her phone. Next to her sat Zach, who had also taken the day off from work.

Casting a glance towards Mirabella, Donald turned to Delilah and replied, "I owe it to Mira for that incense stick she lit up for me last night. Feeling loads better today."

Delilah paused, then laughed, "Well, you've always been robust. That little concoction of hers is just a hobby of hers, nothing more."

Donald's expression twisted slightly. "She made the aromatherapy stick herself?"

"Yep." Delilah nodded.

Donald then remembered their conversation the previous night. He had asked Mirabella where she bought it, and she had quipped, 'Online, only nine ninety-nine with free shipping.'

He chuckled inwardly. Quite the little fibber, wasn't she?

Sensing Donald's gaze, Mirabella looked up only to find him turning away with a look of distaste.

Soon after, Delilah helped Donald to the dining room for breakfast, calling her daughter and son to join as well. Though there was a guest in the house, the atmosphere was much the same as usual. Both Delilah and Shawn were laid-back by nature and didn't stand on ceremony, except when it came to Donald, whom they treated with unspoken politeness.

Midway through breakfast, Delilah looked up at Zach and said, "Zach, you've got that matchmaking event at ten. Don't forget about it."

Zach had hoped that with a guest present, his mother might forget about the

matchmaking ordeal. Yet, here she was, bringing it up again. Scratching his head, he felt a headache coming on.

Hearing this, Donald looked at Zach with a hint of surprise. "Zach, a catch like you still hasn't found a partner?"

"That's right. The community center is organizing a big matchmaking event, and I signed him up," Delilah sighed, sparing no embarrassment for her son.

Zach was at a loss. He was consigned to a community center matchmaking event. How utterly heart-stabbing.

Mirabella silently bowed her head. Poor Zach, such a tragic figure.

"Really, there's no rush. He's still young." Donald coughed.

Delilah shook her head. "He's twenty-six. My friend's kids are already helping out in the kitchen."

Zach couldn't bear to listen any longer. He stuffed a couple of bites of pastry into his mouth, finished quickly, and stood up. "I'm done. You all enjoy your chat"

As he pulled out his chair, ready to leave, Zach's eyes flickered, and he turned to Mirabella. "It's Saturday, and there's nothing much going on. How about you come with me, Mira?"

Caught off guard, Mirabella paused, about to refuse.

"Zach, you're being ridiculous. Who brings their sister to a matchmaking event?" Delilah scolded, before adding, "Besides, your sister doesn't like crowded places. She'll stay home and keep Donald company."

Hearing this, Mirabella stood up, her pretty face serious. "Mom, Zach's future is important. We can't be careless in choosing a partner for him. As his sister, it's my duty to help screen the candidates."

Donald, at the side, was stunned. She clearly didn't want to stay home with an old man like him, and yet she dressed her words up so nobly!

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Delilah reeled her eyebrows in surprise. "Ah, are you going to play wingman for your brother on a blind date?"

Mirabella nodded emphatically, her face the picture of innocence and understanding. "I've never seen a blind date in action. I'm curious—I wanna check it out."

"If our little girl wants to go, then let her be," Shawn, ever the doting father, was practically putty in his daughter's hands when it came to her requests.

Glancing at her husband, Delilah pondered for a moment before conceding with a wave of her hand. "Alright, off you go."

Before long, Mirabella and Zach were stepping out of the diner. “Zach, wait up. I’ll change and be right down,” Mirabella called out, still dressed in her loungewear.

Back in her room, Mirabella opened her wardrobe and initially reached for a hoodie and Jeans but then thought better of it. She hung them back and inscoffeed chose a flowing maxi dress and a trench coat.

The closet, stocked by Delilah, was filled with clothes that Mirabella hardly used since she wore a uniform to school. The tags on many of the items were proof enough.

After changing, Mirabella stood in front of the vanity, forgoing makeup and opting for a casual half-bun. She was ready in no time.

Descending the stairs, Zach gave his sister a once-over. She was tall and willowy, looking even more statuesque in her simple dress and coat. Her legs were accentuated, giving off a cool vibe. His sister was indeed one of a kind.

Having finished his breakfast, Donald lounged in the living room and couldn’t help but mutter under his breath at the sight of Mirabella, ‘Dressed to the nines, anyone would think she is the one going on the blind date.’”

Shortly after, Mirabella and Zach left the house. Once they were gone, Donald grew restless and turned to Shawn, who was prepping a pot of coffee, “Where’s Zach headed for his date again?”

Shawn, warming the coffeepot and reaching for the coffee beans, casually mentioned the location of Zach’s matchmaking event to Donald. It took a moment for him to realize what he had done. Why was Donald asking?

Shawn gave Donald a puzzled look just as Donald stood. “I’m going upstairs to grab my phone.”

“Take your time,” Shawn nodded.

With a wave of his hand, Donald hurried upstairs, leaning on his cane.

11:06

Shawn watched Donald stride away, disappearing around the stairwell with a look of utter astonishment. He could swear his eyes were playing tricks on him.

Once back in his room, Donald approached the nightstand, powered up his phone, and quickly composed a message with an address, sending it off. After shutting down his phone again, Donald sighed, his task complete.

Elsewhere, James looked at the text message that had just arrived on his phone. He tried to call back but was met with the shutdown tone. He passed the phone to Curtis without a word.

Curtis hooked up the phone to his computer while glancing at the text message. "Why's Donald sending us another address? Is he telling us he's at this location now?"

James adjusted his cuffs in silence.

"Come on, track Donald's IP, will ya?" Wyatt urged from the side.

Curtis shot him a look and then returned his focus to the computer screen. The red dot on

the satellite map flickered over the Ashford area, but still, they couldn't pinpoint the exact location.

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Curtis shut his laptop with a sigh, shaking his head. "No dice. I can't pinpoint the exact location.

Wyatt glanced over, seemingly all too familiar with this type of letdown. He didn't even bother to roll his eyes at Curtis as he mused, "So, is this address someplace Donald wants James to check out, or is he just sitting there waiting for us?"

“It’s hard to say. Donald wouldn’t just send an address out of the blue for no good reason... Let me scope out the place.” Curtis reopened his laptop and punched in the coordinates on a satellite map.

After a brief moment, Curtis slowly announced, “Looks like it’s a senior community park.”

Wyatt stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Ah, a park for the elder crowd, huh? Then it’s a pretty safe bet Donald’s there.”

Curtis added, “It’s also not too far from where Ms. Mirabella’s old place was before she moved.”

“Oh, right,” Wyatt snapped his fingers, recognition dawning. That address is in the same neck of the woods as Mirabella’s old neighborhood.”

Looking up at his boss, Curtis suggested, “How about I head over now and look for Donald? Once I find him, I can bring him back to the villa?”

James narrowed his eyes thoughtfully and then stood up, his features sharp yet serene as he said simply, “I’ll go myself.”

Without further discussion, Curtis nodded. Though Donald had only sent an address, it was likely not just about telling James a location. There had to be more to it.

Wyatt flipped over the back of the sofa with ease, ready to take action. “I’ll get the car.”

Curtis, who had just stood up, ready to play chauffeur, stood rooted to the spot.

Wyatt glanced back at Curtis with a playful smirk. “Curtis, you just keep cracking away at your computer skills at home, will ya?”

Curtis, once renowned for his hacking prowess, now reduced to “computer skills, could only scowl silently. Damn it!

In the car.

Mirabella was texting on her phone and chatting with Jenna through Messenger. Her stack of math papers had managed to hijack Jenna's entire weekend, leaving no time for her to hang out with friends.

11:06

Wake up, hit the books, Finish lunch and hit the books again. Even in her dreams, Jenna was haunted by that pile of papers.

Having just completed a set, Jenna snapped some photos and sent them to Mirabella, seeking validation of her answers and casually inquiring about Mirabella's current

activities.

Mirabella replied with just two words. [Matchmaking event.] Then she opened Jenna's photos, zooming in on each one to quickly pinpoint the mistakes Jenna had made

Jenna, anxiously awaiting a response, was shocked by the words 'matchmaking event that appeared on her screen. Her eyes bulged as she quickly typed back, [Hold up, Queen Mira, what's the deal? You're on blind dates at eighteen?]

With the pretty ones going on blind dates, what hope was there for someone like herself? Jenna felt like she was losing touch with the times..

Mirabella sent back the corrected photos and, upon seeing Jenna's message, pressed her fingers to her temples and replied, [With my brother. He's going on the blind dates.]

Jenna breathed out a sigh of relief. [Phew, you had me there. I thought you were the one participating in the dates.]

Mirabella's eyebrows arched as she slowly typed, [I've marked the wrong answers. I'll explain them at school on Monday. By the way, what do you think of my looks? Do I look like I need a blind date?"]

Jenna rolled her eyes.

Tsk! Such shamelessness!

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After wrapping up her chat on Messenger, Jenna reached for another test paper from the stack on her desk. She had barely filled in a few blanks when something struck her. She scampered down the stairs, her feet pounding a rapid beat against the wooden steps.

Kayla was outside, tending to her rose bushes, the afternoon sun casting a warm glow on her face. She jumped a little as her daughter bolted towards her.

"Mom, how old is my cousin again?" Jenna fixed her sparkling eyes on Kayla, a hint of urgency in her voice.

Kayla paused, a tad thrown off by the sudden question. "Which cousin, honey? We have a whole clan of them."

"Dylan, Mom."

"Let's see, he's either 24 or 25, I think. I can't quite remember." Kayla set down her watering can, curiosity piqued. "Why the sudden interest in Dylan?"

"Twenty-four or five, huh..." Jenna muttered under her breath, seemingly content that he wasn't too old after all. Then she popped another question, "Does he have a girlfriend?"

"Not that I know of." Kayla shook her head, her watering can forgotten. "Jenna, what's all this about? Why are you asking?"

Jenna offered a sheepish grin. "Oh, no reason." She paused for a moment, her eyes darting as if chasing a thought before asking, "What do you think about Mira?"

"You mean Mirabella?" Kayla's face softened as she thought of Mirabella. "She's lovely, smart as a whip, and has a heart of gold. A real catch, that one."

After her moment of reflection, Kayla's gaze returned to Jenna, her expression now laced with exasperation. "Speaking of, have you finished that box of test papers Mirabella gave you? You know, if you don't keep up with your studies, you're no help to me around here."

Jenna was dumbfounded. "Excuse me?"

'Am I even her real daughter?"

Meanwhile, Zach had driven to the address Delilah had given him for the blind date. He parked his car with precision and was just about to push open the door when he noticed Mirabella, his sister, hadn't made a move.

"Mira, we're here," he called out.

Mirabella looked up at him and said, "You go ahead, Zach. I'll wait here for your triumphant return."

Zach frowned. "What happened to being cautious and having my back?"

She batted her eyelashes innocently and glanced at her watch. "You know, being late for blind dates can leave a bad impression, Zach."

He shot her a glare. "If I don't find the one, it's half your fault. Get out of the car now. If you don't come with me, I'm not going."

Seeing her brother resort to such tactics, Mirabella sighed, unbuckled her seatbelt, and stepped out of the car. Zach couldn't help but smirk behind his glasses.

Together, they walked toward the entrance of the neighborhood park. Admission was five bucks a head. After buying their tickets, they followed the path into the park. This community haven had been around for years, a dedicated space for local residents to mingle and unwind. It was well-equipped and often hosted community events—its only flaw being that it looked a bit dated.

Mirabella surveyed the park and then glanced at

ach, dressed to the nines like the businessman he was, standing out against the backdrop of their modest rendezvous spot. With a sly smile, she teased, "I have a feeling that your blind dates might not go so well today."

Zach gave her a sideways look. "I have to disagree. I mean, look at me—I'm handsome and a hotshot in the business world. I'm the dream guy for countless women."

It wasn't about being picked but about him doing the picking. If things didn't work out, it would simply be because he hadn't found someone up to his standards.