

## The Double 431

### Chapter 431

Mirabella tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. Her eyes, soft and deep like a peach orchard in bloom, held a teasing glint. “Every woman’s dream guy, you know, doesn’t that only exist in fairytales.”

Zach sighed. Ah, the sting of truth knows no bounds.

Soon enough, they arrived at the designated matchmaking spot in the park. It was an alfresco setting, with rows of picnic tables spread out under the open sky. Each table was adorned with an array of candies, pastries, and beverages that gave the place a rather

festive look.

Naturally, it being a grand matchmaking event meant quite a few hopeful bachelors and bachelorettes were milling about.

“Zach, good luck, buddy. I’ll be over there at the back on one of the park benches waiting for you,” Mirabella said, patting Zach on the shoulder with a smile.

Zach gave her a deadpan look in response.

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With a sly smile, Mirabella turned, walked away to a park bench at a comfortable remove from the matchmaking melee, and sat down.

Moments later, she could still feel the weight of Zach’s soulful puppy–dog gaze. Deciding to ignore Zach’s looks, Mirabella bowed her head and pulled out her phone to fire up a

game.

Meanwhile, Wyatt had just parked his car at the lot outside the park. He gripped the steering wheel as he peered through the windshield towards the park's grand entrance. "Boss, this is the place Donald texted us about."

James squinted outside before promptly opening the car door and stepping out.

Wyatt followed suit, scanning the surroundings for any signs of suspicion. Finding none, he took out his phone and dialed a number while speaking, "I'm gonna try Donald's number again.., Yeah, it's still going to voicemail."

Pocketing his phone again, Wyatt looked over at James. "Should we head into the park to look for him?"

James responded with a nonchalant hum and started towards the park entrance.

Wyatt quickly caught up and purchased two tickets, only to be greeted by the ticket seller's chuckling question. "So, you lads here for the singles' mixer too?"

Wyatt paused, puzzled. "What singles' mixer?"

The ticket seller gave him a look that said, 'come off it, son.' "Oh, come on, if you weren't

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here for the mixer, why else would you come to this older folke' community park?"

Wyatt was flabbergasted.

The seller glanced at Wyatt, understanding his predicament, but then his gaze shifted to, James, and his brow furrowed in confusion. Did such a good-looking young man need to attend a mixer to find a date?

Shaking his head, the ticket seller added, "Better get moving. The event's already started. Any later, and all the good catches will be snatched up."

Wyatt felt a twitch at the corner of his mouth. "No, see, you've got it all-" He stopped midway, thinking better of it. There was no point in explaining.

Wyatt gave his boss a look, and soon they were inside the park..

Not far in, Wyatt's mind began to race. "Boss, from what the old man at the gate said, there's some dating event happening here. And with Donald suddenly messaging you to come... He wouldn't be setting you up for this, would he?"

Knowing Donald's twisted sense of humor, it wasn't out of the question.

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As James stopped, Wyatt paused as well, pondering for a few seconds. "How about this? You go back and wait in the car, and I'll go check it out?"

"No, no, no, we're not here for that," Wyatt hastened to clarify, shaking his head vehemently. He had plans to play matchmaker for James and Ms. Mirabella, and there was no room for misunderstandings.

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pursed his lips, a thin smile barely visible as he pulled a sleek, black face mask pen his pocket and slipped it on with a casual, "No need,"

Wyatt, seeing this, decided not to press the issue. The two men, one after the other, continued their stroll along the park's winding pathways.

Before long, they came upon a boisterous gathering of men and women, a banner flapping gently in the breeze beside them. Emblazoned across it in bold letters was "Singles Mixer."

From a distance, Wyatt surveyed the crowd. "Looks like a bunch of young singles. I doubt Donald would be among them."

With most of his face obscured by the mask and his imposing presence slightly reined in, James wasn't drawing much attention. He glanced over the scene briefly before drawing his gaze away. "Let's go."

He turned on his heel, heading back the way they had come.

"Right," Wyatt murmured in agreement. He could guess Donald's intentions by now, but to send his grandson to a mixer like this... What on earth was going through Donald's mind? If the other prominent families in Riverdale caught wind of this, James' reputation would be in tatters.

Shaking his head in resignation, Wyatt took one last look over the crowd. But as his eyes drifted away, they inadvertently fell upon a solitary figure seated on a public bench. He paused, a flicker of recognition crossing his face.

That silhouette... wasn't that Ms. Mirabella?

"Sir, hold up a sec," Wyatt called out to his charge.

James had already taken a few steps back but stopped at Wyatt's call, turning to follow his gaze. His expression showed a hint of surprise.

"James, isn't that Ms. Mirabella?" Wyatt asked, pointing to ensure his point was clear.

After a few seconds, Wyatt continued, almost to himself, "That's definitely her... But what in the world is she doing here? Cough, she couldn't possibly be here for the mixer, could she?"

As Wyatt finished his thought, James' eyes narrowed, his gaze inscrutable behind the mask.

Meanwhile, Mirabella, slouched against the back of the bench, had been engrossed in her phone, ignoring the several men who had approached her, mistaking her for a participant in the mixer. It wasn't until someone blocked the sunlight that she pinched the bridge of her nose and looked up. She was about to clarify her non-participation, only to be startled

by the identities of the two men before her.

James?" she exclaimed, using his name directly,

It was the first time James had heard her say his name so plainly, and he felt a curious stir within him. His lips quirked beneath his mask as he acknowledged her with a soft "Hmm" Wyatt also greeted her, "Ma. Mirabella."

Slipping her phone into her jacket pocket, Mirabella stood and nodded to them, her curiosity evident. "What brings you two here?"

Then, glancing at the mixer nearby, she added, "You're not here to mingle too, are you?" If they were, it would be quite the coincidence.

James keenly caught the word 'too' in Mirabella's question. His eyes narrowed slightly, taking in her attire, which was very different from her usual style.

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Mirabella cast a casual glance at Wyatt, her expression unfazed. "Really, there's no shame in blind dates."

Wyatt was at a loss for words. The point was, he hadn't been on a blind date, okay!

James' gaze settled on Mirabella's face, a playful smirk playing on his lips. "This place? It doesn't seem quite your style."

Mirabella pursed her lips, spreading her hands in resignation. “No choice, couldn’t stay at home. Just had to tag along with my brother Zach for some matchmaking.”

At the mention of Zach, James arched an eyebrow. “Zach is having blind dates?”

“That’s right.” Mirabella nodded, her gaze drifting to the blind date event nearby. She watched for a few seconds before turning back to James, her tone teasing as she asked, “So, has your family been pressuring you to settle down?” She clearly assumed he was there for a blind date, too.

James adjusted his face mask, his voice lazy. “Ever seen anyone come to a matchmaking event wearing one of these?”

Mirabella conceded the point with a nod, then reconsidered. With James’ looks, he wouldn’t be caught dead at a blind date event, even if his family were pushing him to

marry.

“By the way, you’re welcome to come over to my place. It’s quiet there, too. I’ll set you up with fingerprint access to the gate,” James offered, responding to Mirabella’s earlier complaint about not wanting to be at home.

Mirabella waved the offer off without much thought. “Thanks, but no thanks.”

On the sidelines, Wyatt, ever the diligent servant, quietly contemplated the mention of fingerprint access. He resolved to arrange it posthaste upon their return. Ms. Mirabella’s reluctance notwithstanding, it was something he felt compelled to implement.

Mirabella’s eyes, light and carefree, shifted back to the present. “So, if you’re not here for a blind date, what brings you to this place?”

“Looking for someone,” James replied nonchalantly.

“Oh? Found them yet?” Mirabella asked casually.

“Not yet.” James’ eyes suddenly took on a mischievous glint as he regarded Mirabella. He had received an address from Donald, but bumping into Mirabe, a seemed less than coincidental.

Mirabella didn’t pay much mind to James’ gaze; she didn’t think he’d come specifically to find her. After all, they were neighbors, and he wasn’t the type to be bored.

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Guess you’ll have to keep looking she said.

Wyatt chimed in. “Ms. Mirabella, have you run into any elderly folks here? Maybe in their seventies or eighties?”

Elderly folks?

Mirabelle thought for a moment and shook her head. “No.”

“Alright then.” Although he expected this answer, disappointment flickered across Wyatt’s face. Donald did have a knack for stirring things up.

At the mention of the elderly, Mirabella’s thoughts turned to Donald back home, who had a habit of showing up unannounced, and her mood darkened. She quickly added, “Today, the park is filled mostly with young men and women looking for love.”

“Hmm.” Wyatt nodded and glanced at his employer. Clearing his throat as a subtle hint, he said, “James, why don’t you chat with Ms. Mirabella for a bit? I’ll take another look around the park.”

With a brief look and a low “Hmm” in response, James acknowledged him. Wyatt soon vanished from their sight.

Mirabella wrapped her trench coat tighter around herself and settled back down on the bench. She looked up at James, standing nearby, and after a moment of thought, pulled out a tissue from her bag to wipe down the seat next to her. She patted the spot clean and said, "It's clean now."

James raised an eyebrow at her gesture but didn't refuse the offer, taking a seat beside her. His presence was commanding, and even as he leaned casually against the bench, he exuded a subtle sense of dominance.

Turning her head to look at him, Mirabella was unaffected by his aura. Instead, a playful curiosity danced across her beautiful features. "So, what exactly do you do for a living?"

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James leaned back casually, his long legs crossed in an effortlessly rebellious pose that seemed to scream 'apollod rich kid. His voice carried a tinge of melancholy as he spoke, "I'm just a guy with a frail constitution, living off the family fortune without a job to my name."

Mirabella shot him a glance. Living in a mansion, flanked by two beefy bodyguards wherever he went, and he called himself unemployed? What a poser.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket. Cool as a cucumber, Mirabella fished it out to see it was her mom calling. She quickly answered, "Hey, Mom, how's it going?"

"Sweetheart, how's Zach's blind date event shaping up?" her mother inquired eagerly.

Mirabella lifted her head, scanning the bustling blind date event for Zach, but she couldn't spot him immediately. She vaguely responded, "Seems like he's hitting it off, I guess."

Her mom, Delilah, relaxed at that, chuckling, "Well, that's a relief. I was worried your brother might pull a no-show."



“Nope, he’s there,” Mirabella affirmed truthfully.

“By the way, did you run into a girl wearing a yellow dress, with long hair, and quite the looker? She’s got a cartoon pin on her chest,” Delilah added after a brief pause.

Touching the tip of her nose, Mirabella asked, “Is she one of Zach’s dates for today?”

“Yep, a friend’s daughter. I’ll send you her picture on Messenger. If you see her, try to nudge your brother into striking up a conversation,” Delilah instructed.

“Alright, Mom,” Mirabella agreed.

After hanging up, she soon received the photo from her mom. The girl in the picture

looked to be in her early twenties, indeed quite attractive, with a certain refreshing vivacity

in her eyes.

Standing up, Mirabella turned to James and said nonchalantly, “I’ve got to run an errand. Be right back.”

“Sure,” James replied smoothly, and after a thought, added, “When will you be back?”

Mirabella uttered an “Ah,” as she realized the question, and said, “Not sure, actually. Don’t wait up,” and with that, she headed towards the event.

But after a few steps, James called out, “Hold on a sec.”

Mirabella turned around, her eyes filled with curiosity, “Yeah?”

James stood and, with an unhurried gait, approached her, pulling out a matching black face mask from his pocket, "Thought you might need this."

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Her gaze fell upon the mask in his hand, and after a brief pause, her eyebrows lifted, and her eyes sparkled as she offered a grin. Reaching out, her slender fingers brushed his as she took the mask, taking her time to put it on. With a cool wave to James, she said, Thanks."

And she was off.

James curled his fingers slightly, watching her retreat with a deep look, a small smile playing on his lips beneath the mask.

Returning from a walk in the park, Wyatt noticed Mirabella's absence and asked instinctively, "Ms. Mirabella left?"

James hummed an affirmation.

Wyatt touched his nose, sensing that his boss seemed to be in a surprisingly good mood after talking with Mirabella. Clearing his throat, Wyatt mentioned, "I took a lap around the park, didn't catch sight of Donald anywhere."

James' eyes narrowed slightly, his tone neutral, "He's not here."

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With a firm belief that he couldn't let his little sister doubt his charm, Zach tried to be the picture of chivalry and politeness to any lady who approached him with interest—as long as they weren't outright unpleasant to look at. He was almost indiscriminately welcoming.

Unbeknownst to Zach, who thought himself a dashing gentleman, his reputation was swiftly morphing into that of a notorious ladies' man, and it wasn't long before he was called out.

"Hey, that designer outfit you're rocking, how much does it cost to rent?" teased Autumn, her eyes playfully fixed on Zach as she fiddled with her smartphone.

Zach's polite smile instantly froze. He glanced down at his clothes—rented designer wear? Really? Did this woman ever rub elbows with the wealthy?

A chill crept into Zach's demeanor. "It's not rented, thank you."

Hearing his response, Autumn's beautiful face was etched with mock surprise. "A guy who can afford a suit that costs thousands wouldn't be caught dead at a mixer like this. If you're going to play a part, at least make it believable."

She paused for a beat, then, without waiting for Zach to reply, continued with a mischievous grin, "I've seen plenty of players, but someone as unapologetic as you? That's a first. How many mixers have you crashed so far?"

With a click of her tongue, she summed up her impression. Zach had a bookish bad-boy look, and how many hearts had he broken?

Zach, taken aback by the personal attack, could only wonder in silence. Did designer clothes equate to rental? He was polite to everyone, and now he was a heartbreaker?

Was this woman often played by men?

Zach's expressionless gaze swept over the lady in question. Aside from a reasonably attractive face, her sense of style—or lack thereof—left much to be desired.

Yeah, with that biting tongue, it's no wonder her dating life was in shambles.

Autumn, noticing the silent man before her, simply waved cheerfully and walked away.

After Mirabella donned her face mask, her delicate features were mostly hidden from view. Making her entrance at the mixer, she attracted little attention. Those few who did notice her were simply puzzled by the sight of someone at a dating event wearing a mask.

Mirabella hadn't yet located her brother Zach when she narrowly avoided a collision.

"Oh, I'm so sorry! I didn't see you there," apologized Autumn, who was indulging in some pastries and hadn't expected to bump into anyone. Her lapel pin had come loose and fallen to the ground without her noticing.

Mirabella had stepped to the side in time to avoid being hit. When she saw Autumn's face, she felt a flicker of recognition, but she quickly responded, "No worries."

She bent down to pick up the cartoonish lapel pin that had dropped to the floor and handed it to Autumn. "You dropped this."

Autumn turned her gaze to Mirabella's hand, realizing she had lost her pin. She set her plate of pastries on a nearby table and gratefully accepted the pin back, nodding to Mirabella. "Thank you so much."

"It's no trouble at all," Mirabella replied politely.

After reattaching her pin, Autumn looked up at Mirabella again, noticing the mask that revealed only her pretty, soft eyes. There was something familiar about her...

Autumn racked her brain but couldn't place where she had seen her before. Scratching her head, she finally asked, "So, are you here to find a match too?"

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Mirabella almost blurted out a denial, but a quick thought shifted her response, and she nodded slightly instead.

Seeing this, Autumn gestured towards the face mask that cloaked Mirabella's features and asked with the ease of someone who'd never met a stranger, "Going on a blind date, and you're wearing a mask? What's up with that?"

"Just a bit of a cold," Mirabella coughed, her voice hushed and lower than usual.

"Oh." Autumn showed no sign of doubt. "You sound pretty young. What, are you even twenty yet?"

Mirabella's eyebrows arched subtly. "Close enough."

"You're braving the dating scene at twenty? Let me guess, family pressure?" Autumn reached for some nearby treats and offered them to Mirabella. "These pastries are pretty decent today. Give them a try."

Mirabella cast Autumn a silent glance, saying nothing, and just tugged her mask up a bit higher on her face.

Autumn laughed softly at this and pulled back the offering, smoothly changing the subject, "Spotted anyone you fancy yet?"

"Nope," Mirabella shook her head.

While munching on a pastry, Autumn commented, "Honestly, the pickings today are slim. The gents here don't seem to be much to write home about."

Was that her way of saying she hadn't seen anyone appealing? Mirabella tilted her head, observing Autumn, and offhandedly remarked; "I thought the guy with glasses, in the suit, seemed pretty polished. Didn't you notice him?"

At Mirabella's description, Autumn pretty much guessed who she was talking about. Just then, Zach's figure emerged not too far away, and Autumn pointed him out. "You mean that guy over there, right?"

Following Autumn's gaze, Mirabella nodded. "Yeah."

Autumn simply chuckled and shook her head.

"What, is there something wrong with him?" Mirabella's curiosity tinged her

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voice.

"Don't let his bookish look fool you. He's the king of player. See? He doesn't turn away any woman who comes up to chat. Tell me, can such a guy really be any good?" Autumn grimaced.

A grimace crossed Mirabella's face as she turned again to look at Zach, observing quietly for three minutes. In those minutes, he smiled and engaged with three different women. It was almost too cringe-worthy to watch.

Mirabella quietly withdrew her gaze. No wonder he had a reputation as a player.

She glanced at Autumn. The praises she had for her own brother dissolved on her lips into a simple "... can't argue with that."

"Right?" Autumn raised an eyebrow. "I wouldn't take a guy like that even if he was gifted to me."

The conversation about Zach ended there, and Autumn looked back at Mirabella. "Hey, you look kind of familiar. Have we met before?"

Mirabella blinked, certain in her response. "I don't think so."

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Autumn scratched her head in puzzlement. "But I swear I've seen you somewhere."

While Autumn pondered, Zach's gaze swept their way. He didn't pay much attention to Autumn, but he did notice his sister, seemingly out of place with her mask. He briefly wondered why she would don such a disguise.

Soon enough, Zach made his way towards Mirabella.

Seeing this, Mirabella subtly raised her hand to her forehead as a shield and quickly excused herself, "I just remembered something I have to do. I need to head out." Being known as the sister of the king of players was hardly a badge

of honor.

"Oh, sure..." Autumn came to her senses just in time to see Mirabella's retreating figure, her expression still one of confusion.

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Autumn stood frozen in place, her mind racing as she tried to recall where she had seen that face before. Then it clicked.

The variety show livestream—yes, the one called “Country Comfort.”

Whipping out her phone, Autumn quickly launched the video app and scrolled until she found the clip of Mirabella, face half-hidden behind a mask. No wonder she looked familiar—it was Juztin’s sister!

Autumn blinked in disbelief, a bit flustered at her own oversight. How on earth did she not recognize Mirabella the moment she laid eyes on her?

Stomping her foot in frustration, Autumn berated herself. Why, oh why, did she have to rant about that sleazy playboy with Juztin’s sister? Couldn’t they have talked about literally anything else?

That darn playboy had ruined her quality time with Juztin’s sister.

As Autumn caught sight of Zach approaching, she huffed with annoyance and spun on her heel to leave.

Zach, stopping in his tracks, was puzzled.

After Mirabella left, she made a quick trip to the restroom. When she emerged, her phone buzzed from within her coat pocket. It was Zach calling. She picked up, exchanged a few words, and then hung up.

She didn’t return to the speed dating event but headed straight for the park exit. Before leaving, she deliberately lifted her gaze to the spot where she had been sitting earlier. There was no sign of James, so she let her gaze fall away.

Zach was waiting at the park’s entrance. As Mirabella approached, she noticed his sour expression. Pulling down her mask, she asked with suspicion, “Zach, what’s up with you?” He looked perfectly



cheerful chatting up that beauty earlier. Zach glanced at his sister, wondering how to explain being snubbed in such an embarrassing way. Could he even mention it?

Taking a deep breath, Zach forced a smile. "It's nothing."

"Oh, did you find anyone interesting?" Mirabella asked casually.

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Zach felt a vein throb at his temple. "No." He checked his watch and started walking towards the parking lot. "It's almost noon. Let's grab some lunch."

Mirabella raised an eyebrow and followed.

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Half an hour later, their car pulled up outside an upscale downtown restaurant. Mirabella stepped out, waiting for Zach to park. Turning to him, she said in a low voice, "Zach, I forgot my wallet today."

Zach's lips twitched in response. "...I've got it covered." Well, their family owned this restaurant anyway.

Straightening her posture, Mirabella led the way inside. Upon entering the grand foyer, with its luxurious and costly decor, she couldn't help but marvel inwardly at the perks of wealth: living in the finest homes, dining on the finest food—nothing that the backwoods could ever compete with.

The maitre d' had just seen off a group of distinguished guests when he caught sight of Mirabella. His voice unintentionally hitched, "Welcome... to our establishment!"

The excitement was palpable in his voice as he spoke the last words.

Mirabella gave him a glance, finding something oddly familiar about him. Where had she seen him before? After a moment's thought, she remembered the delivery guy from a while back—it was him.

She glanced at his name tag, impressed, and commented, "You've done pretty well for yourself." Going from delivery guy to restaurant manager in no time—that took some real skill.

The manager cleared his throat, replying humbly, "It's all thanks to the boss' support."

"Keep up the great work!" Mirabella encouraged sincerely.

The manager stood up straighter, his expression firm with resolve. "I will!"

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Zach strolled in, and the restaurant manager tipped his head with a respectful nod. "Would you folks like a private booth or a table in the main dining area?" he asked.

"Private booth, please,"

"The main area."

The first suggestion came from Zach, while Mirabella voiced the second

The manager, catching the mismatched preferences, cleared his throat and said. "How about the main dining area? I just remembered that the prate boots aren't quite ready yet."

The boss had made it clear: everything should cater to their yours back.

Zach shot the manager a side-eye. If the private booths weren't reach Way dù he offer them in the first place? It was obvious his dad had been wistering sweet nothings to the staff behind the scenes. Didn't they realize se right through them?

Ever since Mirabella came back, the sons of the family had been bumped down E notch, even when it came to something as simple as getting a MR DER

dinner!

Zach decided he needed to have a very heartfelt chat with his de MOT AND dad. He was their flesh and blood, too. He deserved a interesect

Pretending not to notice Zach's glare, the manager, al smies, les ne clearly focused on serving Mirabella. "This may please best read slipping up and addressing her by her title.

He had to catch himself. His boss had warned hem tine and veri low-key and not to let slip any details of the farm NUSIKSSON IN ON lady. Although he didn't understand me rationale. De mange bene

secret thrill of it all. Watching the young git be QAMOUS TO DEAN family's empire... was actually kind of engegn

Hearing the manager's near slip of the word "Move Wa momentarily puzzled. It seemed like every time m

almost blurt out Madame.

Weird guy. She touched the tip of her nose and followed behind him.

As she walked away, two customers who had been turned away at the front desk for not having a reservation were clearly disgruntled. "Those two came in after us and didn't have a reservation. Why do they get to go in?" one complained.

"Exactly! Why do they get to choose between the main dining area and a private booth, and we don't? Your restaurant's staff really have selective vision, don't they?" added the other.

The receptionist, who had been wearing a 'customer is king' smile, instantly dropped her grin upon hearing their complaints. Why? Because those were the restaurant owner's daughter and son.

The receptionist didn't bother to explain, simply responding with a detached, "Oh, we do have selective vision here. I suggest you find a restaurant that meets your standards."

The two customers' faces turned red with anger, and they stormed off, muttering under their breath.

Although Mirabella was far off, her sharp ears caught the exchange at the front desk, and she couldn't help feeling even more baffled by the odd treatment.

Once seated, the manager personally brought over some lemonade, pouring for both before leaving with a deep bow. The respect was palpable.

Elbows on the table and chin in her hands, Mirabella turned to Zach, "Zach, don't you think the service here is a bit too... attentive?"

Zach sipped his lemonade, set down the cup, and replied, "It's normal, isn't it? You do know this restaurant is part of our family's holdings, right?"

Hearing this, Mirabella's expression froze, "What did you say? Could you repeat that? I must have misheard. Whose restaurant is this?"

Zach's mouth twitched. "This restaurant is part of The Davis family's portfolio."

It echoed in her head, 'part of The Davis family's portfolio'...

Mirabella thought her ears were playing tricks on her.

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Mirabella had downed a few cups of lemonade, before she could fully grasp the concept that "this restaurant is part of the Davis family's portfolio."

"So, our family is, like, filthy rich?"

Zach, gazing upon his sister's incredulous expression, belatedly realized that perhaps their parents hadn't briefed her on the family's financial standing. He cleared his throat and ventured, "Well, we're... moderately well-off, I suppose."

The script of a poor family narrative was crumbling before Mirabella's eyes, and with a mix of emotions, she prodded, "Moderately well-off, what does that even mean?"

"We're probably a tad more comfortable than your average public company?" Zach replied without a hint of trying to conceal the truth. He genuinely didn't know. His own startup consumed all his time, leaving him little interest in the family's extensive assets.

Mirabella shot him a look of mild disdain; his answer was as good as no answer. Zach scratched his nose and looked down, picking up his cup to take a sip. However, promptly, he fished out his smartphone and sent a message on Messenger. [Dad, just how rich are we?]

Shawn, on the receiving end, sent back a puzzled question mark.

After pondering a moment, Zach texted back, [Mirabella's asking.]

Shawn, clutching his phone and unsure why his daughter was suddenly inquiring, decided to stick with the little white lie he had spun for amusement's sake, replying, [Just tell her we're broke.]

Zach pushed up his glasses, typing, [...Why do we say that?]

Shawn replied, [Because we've always told her we're not well-off.]

Zach's lips twitched. He had just finished typing [She already knows about the money.], but before he could hit send, another message from Shawn popped up. Shawn: [You better not bring up our wealth in front of your sister, or you're dead

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meat.]

The threat, palpable even through the screen, made Zach's fingers tremble, and he hastily deleted the drafted message, Luckily, he hadn't sent it or might have been in real trouble.

Zach composed and sent a new message. (Don't you know me, Das? Even if Mirabella found out about our wealth, it definitely wouldn't be from me Pest easy! \*smileyface“]

Shawn: [Alright, as long as you're aware

Zach: [Crystal clear.]

Zach pocketed his phone and turned a grave expression toward his sister, Virz what if I told you that all that talk about our family being loaded and owning this restaurant was just me, you know, shooting the breeze? You'd believe that right?"

Mirabella was silent.

“Right, I’m pretty sure you’d believe it’ he said, with a hint of self–assurance

Whether he was trying to convince himself or brainwash Mirabela was under but he had already decided to retreat to his own home for a while

Mirabella just stared at him, questioning his mental state internal.

Soon after, the restaurant manager brought over their orders, setting the table with meticulous care before reluctantly making his exit

Zach rubbed his temples as the manager left if it weren't for all this fuss would he really have slipped up and found himself on the verge of being homeless?

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Halfway through her meal, Mirabella excused herself to visit the restroom.

The restaurant was one of the city’s most upscale establishments, where a table was unattainable without a membership or an advanced reservation, even for the wealthy. On this particular evening, the venue was bustling with patrons.

Emerging from the restroom, Mirabella took a moment to survey the dining area. The place was packed to the rafters.

While ordering, she had glanced at the menu prices; each dish carried a hefty three–digit price tag... Her family must’ve been more than just comfortably off.

With a sigh, she retracted her gaze, intending to return to her table. But then, unexpectedly, she bumped into a familiar face.

“What are you doing here?” Mandy asked, her perfectly made–up face etched with a touch of surprise.

She had managed to snag a reservation at this exclusive spot and invited a few high-society ladies for dinner. Though they were seated in the main dining area,

was still quite prestigious. Seeing her foster daughter here didn't add up..

Mirabella, too, was taken aback by the small world they lived in, where one could encounter a member of the Gilbert family just by going out for dinner. She gave Mandy a brief, indifferent look and said nothing.

Mandy, noticing Mirabella's silence, looked around. Mindful of the public setting, she stepped closer and whispered with a sneer, "What, has the Davis family fallen on such hard times that you've started

working as a waitress here?"

The minimum spend in this restaurant was in the high hundreds, and she didn't believe for a second that Mirabella could afford such luxury. Mirabella was raised in the countryside, so Mandy doubted the girl even had the nerve to step foot inside. Being a waitress seemed the only logical explanation.

The restaurant manager, always vigilant of his patron's comfort, cast a glance at Mandy speaking with his esteemed guest. Did she just call Mirabella a waitress? He subtly signaled the head waiter and whispered a few instructions.

Unaware of the manager's actions, Mirabella looked at Mandy with a wry smile and let out a melancholic sigh. "Yes, indeed. My family truly is destitute."

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The manager, who had quietly approached from behind, nearly stumbled upon hearing her words. The Davis family, poor? There must've been some



misunderstanding about the word 'poor,'"

Mandy felt there was something off about her foster daughter's demeanor, but she didn't give it much thought or notice the passing manager. She chuckled lightly. "If you're poor, don't pretend to be otherwise. Pretense costs money, too." She thought back to when she'd generously offered the Davis couple positions in the Gilbert Corporation and how Mirabella had brazenly demanded a high salary. The memory seemed absurd to her now,

Mirabella nodded earnestly, "You're absolutely right."

Mandy's brows furrowed involuntarily. In her previous encounters with Mirabella, she had always been arrogant and disrespectful, Why the sudden change in attitude?

Though puzzled, Mandy had no desire for further interaction, not wanting her high-society friends to witness any embarrassment. She brushed her arms as if to rid herself of some invisible dust from being too close to Mirabella. "Remember your place. Don't let on that you know me while you're here, understand?" Mandy warned in a low voice.

With that, she lifted her chin and walked past Mirabella with a disdainful air, heading towards the restroom. Her departure was as haughty as it gets.