

The Double 441

Chapter 441

Mirabella arched an eyebrow ever so slightly as she moved forward, only to be startled by the sound of a thud behind her, followed by a rather pitiful yelp. She paused for a moment, languidly turning her head, but all she could see was the smiling face of the restaurant manager standing behind her, his towering frame blocking everything else from view.

“Can I do anything for you?” the manager asked, his voice a blend of deference and warmth.

Mirabella touched the tip of her nose, gave him a two-second glance, and replied, “No, nothing.”

The manager’s smile did not waver. A chorus of grumbling came from behind him, which he seemed to ignore completely.

Mirabella tilted her head with a smirk that wasn’t quite a smile, then shifted her gaze away and walked towards her booth.

Back at the table, Zach had nearly finished his meal and looked up at his sister. “Took you a while in the restroom, huh?”

Mirabella picked up her fork again and started eating as she spoke, “Ran into someone I know.”

“Someone you know? A classmate?” Zach casually wiped his mouth with a napkin.

She shook her head, offering no further explanation. After all, bringing up the Gilbert family hardly seemed worthwhile.

Once Mirabella had walked away, the restaurant manager’s smile vanished as quickly as it had appeared, and he headed back to the front desk to attend to the

cashier.

Mandy emerged from the restroom at a snail's pace, her walk noticeably awkward. She hadn't expected such bad luck today. She had finally snagged a reservation at this upscale eatery, only to slip and fall in the restroom. Though not many saw, it was still a blow to her dignity. And the spot where she fell still throbbed with pain.

Mandy took a deep, silent breath, maintaining a poised and polite smile as she

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approached her circle of well-heeled friends.

Two restaurant staff stood near their seats, engaged in some discussion just as Mandy approached.

"Mrs. Gilbert, didn't you say you were a member here?" one of her high-society friends asked with a frown.

Mandy was clueless about what had transpired. She nodded, "Yes, I am."

"Then why does the manager tell us our reservation wasn't successful and we need to leave?"

At this, Mandy's brow furrowed. She turned to the restaurant manager standing beside her and protested, "That's impossible. I have a text confirming our reservation, and when we entered, your staff checked and seated us here." She quickly pulled out her phone and showed the confirmation text.

The manager glanced at it and dismissively declared, "I'm sorry, but that message is outdated, and your membership doesn't meet our restaurant's standards anymore. It's been canceled."

Mandy's head buzzed with disbelief. "How does my membership not meet the standards? Why was it canceled?"

With that attitude toward Mirabella, did she believe she was worthy of the establishment's membership? Dream on.

The manager's lips pressed together, his impatience evident as he said, "I'm afraid you'll need to find another restaurant."

Mandy trembled with fury at his attitude. She glanced at her three friends, whose family backgrounds and husbands' status were at least on par with, if not superior to, the Gilbert family. They had finally managed to get together for a meal to bond, and now this scene had unfolded. Where did that leave their pride, and what would they think of her?

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Mandy's head was throbbing, and she couldn't fathom how just stepping out of the restroom could lead to such a mess

She couldn't let her high society friends get embarrassed over this debacle. Taking a deep breath. Mandy clutched her purse and confronted the restaurant manager with a stern voice, "Is this how you treat your customers? Why on earth would I bring my friends here if we hadn't secured a reservation?"

She paused for effect, then continued, "I've never heard of a restaurant arbitrarily canceling a customer's membership and then kicking them out. Do you really want me to call and lodge a formal complaint right now?"

The manager plastered on a bureaucratically polite smile, oozing arrogance. "Please, be my guest."

Mandy's face turned a shade of steel, her composure slipping as anger took hold. She massaged her temples and was about to unleash a fierce retort, "Do you have any idea who we-"

But she stopped mid-sentence when she caught sight of Mirabella sitting by the window. Her jaw dropped. Wasn't Mirabella supposed to be waitressing? Why was she sitting

there?

A flurry of questions swirled in Mandy's mind. Then, her gaze shifted to the young man sitting across from Mirabella. Although she only saw his profile, he was unmistakably memorable. He was the Davis family's sharp-tongued second son, a lawyer. She had encountered his biting wit when Summer had returned to the Gilbert family fold.

A sneer escaped Mandy's lips as she pointed toward Mirabella and said, "Oh, the irony. Your establishment would rather cater to posers with empty pockets than to genuine patrons like us.

Amusing, isn't it?"

Following the direction of Mandy's accusatory finger, the manager glanced over, took a mere two seconds to assess the situation, and then looked back at Mandy with a hint of something else in his gaze.

Mandy sensed mockery in his eyes. Frowning, she demanded, "What's with that attitude?"

"You might as well stop wasting time here. Our restaurant will not be serving you in the future. That's final," the manager said dismissively, then glanced back towards Mirabella, thinking about presenting the after-dinner fruit. He walked away, leaving Mandy behind.

Outraged, Mandy no longer cared about appearances. She shouted, "Hold it right there! I demand a proper explanation, or this matter is far from over!"

The manager turned back around, his imposing frame and rugged features casting an

intimidating aura when devoid of emotion. Mandy flinched under his gaze, instinctively

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stepping back.

The manager smiled, his eyes once again settling on Mirabella as he spoke in a tone devoid of warmth, "Do you even know who they are?"

Mandy's brow furrowed, as she gripped her purse tighter, a sinking feeling that she might not want to hear the answer.

"That's the owner's daughter and son," the manager stated flatly, walking away.

The owner's daughter and son...

The words echoed in Mandy's ears, disbelief etched across her face.

How's this possible?

How could a family living in a run-down neighborhood, driving a beat-up old car, possibly be connected to a restaurant under a global top 100 enterprise?

The manager must've been playing some kind of sick joke.

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Mandy gazed blankly upward, her eyes once again seeking out Mirabella in the distance. The restaurant manager, who had been so cold to her moments ago, was now tending to Mirabella with a smile that was all reverence and eagerness to please.

Mandy lifted her hand to rub her eyes, convinced she was witnessing an illusion and that

this couldn't be real.

If the Davis family really were wealthy, how could her biological daughter Summer be in the dark about it? Why hadn't she mentioned a word? It had to be a sham, all of it.

Mandy's expression grew stiff, her circle of well-to-do friends momentarily forgotten.

Unaware of the turmoil inside Mandy's mind, her high-society friends, all notable figures in their own right, were now too distraught by Mandy's scene to linger any longer, let alone confront the restaurant staff. Before long, they left the establishment, clearly disheartened.**

By the time Mandy came back to her senses, she was already seated in her car, being hailed by her driver. Mandy turned to the driver and muttered, "Take me back to the Gilbert residence, before pulling out her phone.

She shot a message to her daughter on Messenger. [Are the Davises rolling in dough?]

When Summer saw the message, she was in the middle of a workout at the gym, trying to keep a low profile since the Twitter debacle, just hoping to quietly get through this embarrassing phase.

After reading her mother's text, her sweat-drenched face turned cold as she typed back, [No idea.]

What did it matter whether the Davises were rich or not to the Gilberts? Even if they knew the Davises had money, were they supposed to fawn over them?

A sneer curled on Summer's lips as she tossed her phone onto the wooden floor, then popped on her headphones and resumed her stretching exercises.

Mandy's eyes darkened slightly upon receiving the response. After a moment of silence, she scrolled through her contacts and dialed a number. The call connected almost instantly, and Mandy didn't bother with small talk. "I need you to dig up some information for me..."

After Mirabella and Zach finished their meal, they left the restaurant. As the car pulled up to the house, Mirabella unbuckled her seatbelt, preparing to get out and open the gate.

Zach, who had been deep in thought during the drive, suddenly called out to Mirabella, "Hey, Mira, I'm going to be swamped at the office for a while, so I won't be staying at

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home.

Mirabella paused in the act of opening the door, turning to look at him with bright eyes, "Oh, Zach, you have to work overtime?"

Zach cleared his throat, his gaze fixed outside the car window at his own villa, and nodded. "Yeah, you should come hang out at my place when you get a chance. You haven't been over there yet." While he couldn't see his sister every day, he could try to persuade her into staying over at his place.

Mirabella didn't think much of it and hummed in acknowledgment. After a moment, she added, "Don't stay up too late with work. Take care of yourself."

Zach touched his nose. "...Yeah." Right now, working overtime seemed the only way to keep his neck out of the noose.

In no time, Mirabella stepped out of the car. Instead of heading straight for the gate, she waited for Zach to drive away before turning around. As she was about to enter the gate code, a thought struck her, and she hesitantly withdrew her hand.

Looking up at the neighboring villa, Mirabella stepped aside and pulled out her phone, sending out a message on Messenger. [Hey. Does your offer from this morning still stand?]

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Upon hearing the distinctive tone of his customized notification chime, James swiftly fished his phone from his pocket. A brief look of surprise flitted across his face as he read the text from girl next door.

The words from this morning?

His piercing eyes squinted slightly as his fingertips paused on the screen. After a long moment, a faint smile crossed his chiseled features, and he replied, [Of course, my word is my bond.]

Mirabella was referring to his earlier offer, “You can come over to my place sometime. It’s peaceful. I’ll add your fingerprint to the front gate.”

Mirabella pursed her lips as she read the response and typed back, [Are you home right now?]

James replied, [Yes, just come over.]

With that, Mirabella pocketed her phone and made her way next door, decisively choosing the handsome neighbor over the insufferable Donald.

As Mirabella approached the villa next door, James stepped out to greet her, dressed in light casual wear, his handsome face exuding an air of serene elegance. He reached out to open the gate, eyeing Mirabella with an inquisitive intensity. “So, did Zach’s blind date wrap up?”

“Yeah,” she nodded, stepping inside.

James closed the door behind them without a second thought.

“How’d it go? Anyone catch your eye?” he asked in a low voice, walking beside her.

Mirabella hesitated briefly before admitting, “Nope.” Finding a match for the infamous playboy was a lost cause.

They had just reached the entrance hall when James suddenly took hold of Mirabella’s arm. The warmth of his hand seeped through her clothes, causing her to look up in confusion.

James quickly released her, a gentleman once more, and pointed to the small, computerized security system on the wall. “For the fingerprint.”

Catching on, Mirabella moved closer to the embedded touchscreen with a look of mild surprise that faded as she remembered the tech-savvy Curtis.

James had already pulled up the fingerprint entry settings. “Let me show you how,” he said, stepping aside to give her space.

But Mirabella was already ahead of him, deftly navigating the screen and completing the

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process in under ten seconds, signaled by the system’s confirmation of a successful entry.

James’ hand awkwardly lingered in the air. He glanced at the screen, impressed by her proficiency. “Seems like you’re quite familiar with security systems,” he remarked.

Mirabella curled her fingers slightly, her long, curled lashes casting a shadow over her eyes. “We installed one at my place recently. I picked up a few things from the installer,” she explained, then sidestepped toward the nearby shoe cabinet.

James didn’t dwell on it, pulling out a pair of new, fluffy pink slippers and placing them before her. “Brand new.”

Mirabella eyed the pastel slippers with a touch of resignation and slipped them on. Pink, everywhere she went.

With her footwear changed, she followed James into the living room, which was conspicuously empty, save for the two of them.

“Are your guys... I mean, Wyatt and Curtis not around today?” Mirabella tactfully swallowed the words ‘your two muscle-bound bodyguards.’

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James sauntered over to the fridge and fetched a bottle of water, effortlessly twisting off the cap before handing it over to Mirabella. “They've got their own fish to fry,” he said, his voice taking on a nonchalant tone whenever he mentioned Wyatt.

Mirabella let out a soft ‘oh, taking the water and sipping it gingerly.

James found his spot on the couch, slouched back and sank into the cushions with casual ease. “Make yourself at home here,” he drawled. “Do whatever you please.”

Casting him a sidelong glance, Mirabella offered a genuine compliment, “You're quite the generous host, boss.”

Awry twitch flickered at the corner of James’ mouth before he steered the conversation in another direction. “You don’t strike me as the type to stay out without good reason. Trouble at the homestead?”

Pulling a throw pillow to her chest, Mirabella propped her chin atop it and snuggled deeper into the sofa, her voice distant and soft. "We've got company at home."

Asmirk played on James' lips. "Seems like this guest of yours is someone of importance." Mirabella waved a dismissive hand, desiring nothing more than tranquility. "Just let me catch some z's." With that, she closed her eyes, her serene expression betraying no sign of guard.

James' eyes briefly swept over her, his lips curving slightly. He reached for a book on the coffee table, content to let the room settle into a peaceful hush punctuated only by the occasional turn of a page.

At one point, his phone buzzed with a message. He glanced at the screen, then muted the device and laid it back down, inadvertently missing a call from Donald.

Time trickled by, and Mirabella, who had only intended to rest her eyes briefly, slipped into a genuine slumber. It was her phone's insistent buzzing that eventually roused her. Groggily, she fished it out and paused before answering the call, "Hello, Donald..."

James, descending the stairs with a blanket in hand, drew near just in time to catch the name 'Donald' as Mirabella spoke into the phone. He paused, taking a few measured steps to stand by the armrest of Mirabella's couch.

She wrapped up the call with Donald quickly, hanging up without much conversation.

As James was about to speak, his gaze inadvertently swept over the phone in her hand, still lit with the recent call's glow. When he saw the number at the top of her recent calls list, his expression took on a peculiar cast. He set the blanket aside, asking casually, "Someone looking for you?"

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Mirabella hummed a confirmation, then stowed her phone away and rose from the couch, stretching her arms languidly. "I'd better head back," she said.

Leaving so soon? Won't you stay a bit longer?" James' voice was gentle, but he made no move to insist.

Mirabella adjusted her jacket, her demeanor lazy, "Nah, I've got homework to tackle."

Realizing that she wasn't going back on her decision, James didn't press further. He escorted her to the garage, watching until she had disappeared inside her own place before turning back to the quiet of the living room.

Reflecting on the glimpse of the number he'd seen on Mirabella's phone, James' Aiea mM though ttullp W&pic éd up his phone from the coffee table, finding several texts and a couple of missed calls, all from his 'runaway' grandfather, Donald.

After reading the texts, James refrained from calling back. Instead, his fingers traced the gctéén 86 he centém ated for amoment, then sent a message in response. [You're with the Davis family.]

He chose an assertive tone, leaving no room for doubt.

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Over at the house, Mirabella walked in to find Donald and Shawn deep in a game of chess in the living room. "Hey there," she greeted politely as she approached them.

Donald paused, a chess piece in hand, and glanced up at Mirabella. "Do you play?" he

asked.

Leaning casually against the armrest of the sofa, Mirabella replied in a nonchalant tone, "Nope."

"Oh," Donald muttered, his interest waning. He returned his focus to the game, his gaze intense as if nothing else mattered.

Mirabella shot Donald a sidelong glance. The man was quite the actor, pretending to be so engrossed in the game.

At that moment, Shawn looked up at his daughter. Then, turning towards the doorway, he asked, "Honey, where's Zach? You're all by yourself."

"Zach's got to work late these next few days, so he won't be staying over," Mirabella answered, her voice steady. In her mind, though, she figured Zach was just dodging another matchmaking setup at home, using this lame excuse to stay away.

Shawn's face softened at her response, despite a flicker of suspicion that Zach's sudden overtime was a bit odd. He didn't dwell on it, though. One less thorn in his side at home was a pleasant thought.

"Good, good, overtime means extra cash. Saves us from whispers of freeloading. We aren't exactly rolling in dough here. Can't afford to keep layabouts," Shawn casually remarked.

Mirabella raised her eyebrows, her expression complex. If she hadn't gone out to lunch with Zach at the restaurant earlier, she might have bought into the nonsense.

Donald, however, cast a doubtful glance at Shawn. With all the priceless antiques around the house, calling themselves anything short of wealthy was a stretch.

Just then, Donald's phone chimed with a couple of text messages. He pulled it from his coat pocket.

[You're at the Davis family.]

[Are you coming back on your own, or do I need to send someone to fetch you?]

Donald made a face before pocketing the phone. A simple call to Mirabella while forgetting to turn off his phone was all it took to get tracked down by his grandson.

"Donald, your move," Shawn said with a smile, bringing Donald back from his thoughts.

Donald's gaze fell back on the chessboard. After a brief pause, he spoke up rather

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sheepishly, "You know what, Shawn, I think I'll call it a day. My grandson's asking for me.

Shawn looked up in surprise. "Your grandson's wrapped up with his business?"

Clearing his throat, Donald nodded. "Yeah."

Mirabella, who was about to head upstairs, overheard the exchange and turned around, a hint of curiosity in her eyes. Just moments ago, the man had been playing the lonely old

card.

Unaware of Mirabella's scrutinizing gaze, Donald reached for his cane and slowly rose to his feet. "I've imposed on you enough these past days. When I'm back in Riverdale, do drop by for a visit," he said to Shawn.

Shawn stood up as well, nodding respectfully. "You're too kind. I'll be sure to make the trip."

Riverdale? Mirabella's eyes lingered on Donald for a moment longer.

Donald's phone rang again. He quickly answered with a hint of irritation, "Got it, I'm on my

way."

After hanging up, Donald nodded at Shawn and then awkwardly at Mirabella. Without further explanation, he started towards the front door.

“I’ll walk you out,” Shawn offered.

Donald paused, then with a quick change of heart, he replied, “No need. Let Mira do it. I’ve taken quite a liking to the girl.”

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Although Shawn always felt that Donald was a bit too much of an odd duck when it came to Mirabella, he figured that given how charming she was, only a rare soul wouldn’t take a shine to her.

With that thought, he turned to his daughter and said with a wink, “Well, Mira, why don’t you walk Donald out?”

Mirabella glanced at Donald and gave a noncommittal grunt. They headed out, one trailing the other. After a few steps, Donald stopped short, as if he remembered something, and stared at Mirabella intently. “Hey, that bargain incense you had for, what, nine ninety-nine with free shipping—got any left?”

Mirabella stared back at Donald, emotionless. “No.” He’d already mooched a meal, and now he was angling for her scents? Fat chance.

“Ah,” Donald said, touching his nose and putting on a pitiful, wounded expression as he walked on. “Well, age catches up to ya, you know... My sleep ain’t what it used to be...”

Mirabella remained silent. Soon, they reached the yard. Mirabella looked up and saw a figure standing outside the door, hands clasped behind him, radiating an aura of proud chilliness.

What on earth James doing at her doorstep?

Narrowing her eyes, Mirabella continued forward with Donald. Suddenly, she turned to him and asked, “Donald, don’t tell me that’s your grandson?”

Donald pursed his lips and nodded with a smile. “Yep, that’s my boy.”

“How ‘bout it, isn’t my grandson a looker? Feel a little flutter in your heart?” Donald said, tilting his chin up with evident pride.

As they reached the gate, Mirabella opened it without a word. James looked up, and his gaze paused for a moment on Mirabella’s expressionless face. He then turned to his grandfather with a half-smile. “Running away from home? Grandpa, you’re really living it up these days.”

Donald coughed, showing a flicker of guilt, but then he remembered his box of coffee beans, and his demeanor swiftly changed. He planted his cane firmly on the ground with a thud. “You cheeky lad, you know exactly why I left!”

James’ handsome features remained cool as he simply gazed at Donald, not uttering a word. A little scared, Donald waved him off. “Let’s get moving.”

James turned to Mirabella with a soft sigh. “I only just found out my grandpa was staying with you. He didn’t cause too much trouble, did he?”

Recalling Donald’s previous antics, Mirabella’s tone was icy. “Of course, he did.”

She paused before adding, “There are hospital bills, emotional distress from being falsely accused of a hit-and-run, and the expenses of him freeloading at my place. How do you propose we settle this?”

Donald, who had just stepped out, stumbled upon hearing this. He turned to Mirabella with a look of utter disbelief. She was nothing short of a money-hungry fiend!

Hearing this, James suddenly looked up at his grandfather. “Hospitalized? Hit-and-run?”

Donald quickly looked away, pretending not to hear a word.

James massaged his temples, all too familiar with his grandfather's antics. He pulled out his phone, opened his banking app, and, in full view of Mirabella, transferred ninety thousand bucks.

Mirabella's mood instantly brightened. She waved at James, all smiles. "Well, actually, it's nothing. It's our duty to help the elderly, isn't it?"

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Mirabella sent off her visitor with a flourish of delight that made Donald question, for the umpteenth time, if he had unwittingly stumbled upon an academy award-winning actress in disguise.

After returning to the villa with James, Donald still couldn't wrap his head around the events.

"Spill it. What have you been up to these past two days, and what's this about a hospital?" James asked, his tone even-keeled as his long fingers deftly rolled up his sleeves.

Donald sat silently on the couch, his gaze drifting. "I haven't done anything." He made no mention of his little scam fiasco.

A half-smirk flickered across James' face as he glanced over. Donald cleared his throat, resting his hands on his cane, and with a huff, demanded, "So, where's my coffee beans?" James had anticipated the tea debacle coming to light, so he owned up with a casual admission, "Gave it away."

Donald felt a pang of betrayal. "You ungrateful brat!"

With an unflinching face, James nodded, "Yes, you've praised me with those words before." He had to live up to the label, after all.

Donald glared at him. James' ability to be shamelessly insufferable was somehow reaching new heights.

Taking a deep breath and letting go of the coffee beans incident, Donald shifted gears, “So, tell me, how are things going with the Davis family’s young lady?”

James met his grandfather’s gaze with calm indifference, his eyes cool and detached, betraying no emotion, “So, this is why you staged that accident and showed up at the Davis place?” He decided to spare Donald the mention of freeloading for the sake of his dignity.

Donald diverted his gaze with a mumble, “Can’t I be anxious about you finding a girlfriend?”

James massaged his temples, opting to remain silent.



“Just look at you, all stoic and indifferent... Sigh, when will I ever see a

granddaughter-in-law?” Donald lamented.

James glanced at him and said softly, “Perhaps in your dreams.”

Donald retorted, “You little brat!”

Soon after, the men James had dispatched to search for Donald – Wyatt and Curtis –

finally ambled back to the villa.

Wyatt, who had been shadowing James, wasn’t too concerned about facing Donald, Curtis, however, as the mastermind behind the coffee beans heist, felt quite uneasy. But much to his relief, aside from Donald’s piercing looks, no fire came his way.

After studying Donald’s reaction, Curtis’ curiosity piqued, and he ventured, “Mr. Donald, where have you been shacking up these last few days?”

Unaware that Donald had emerged from the neighboring Davis residence, Curtis was genuinely baffled by his repeated yet unsuccessful attempts to pinpoint Donald's whereabouts.

As Curtis spoke, Wyatt also sneakily eyed Donald, equally curious. Donald half-closed his eyes and leveled a look at Curtis. "I fear the truth might be a blow to your ego."

Curtis' mouth twitched, feeling his skills belittled once more.

"So, where exactly were you? Curtis couldn't locate you no matter how hard he tried," Wyatt chimed in.

"Amateur," Donald scoffed. "Your tech game is weak."

Curtis, frequently stung by such remarks these days, had grown numb to the jabs.

James cast a glance at Donald and stated flatly, "He was next door."

"Next door?" Wyatt scratched his head. The Davis family lived next door, didn't they? His eyes widened in shock, "No way, Donald was crashing at Ms. Mirabella place?"

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Wyatt couldn't help but feel like he'd stumbled into a fantasy novel. With a hint of uncertainty, he asked, "Donald, were you really staying with the Davis family?"

That's why I keep telling you, you're all so clueless!" Donald huffed with a touch of annoyance.

Rubbing his nose, Wyatt thought, "Who would've guessed you'd sneak off to Ms. Mirabella's place without making a peep?"

Curtis, on hearing this, lapsed into a contemplative silence. If Donald was simply crashing with the neighbors, Curtis wouldn't give it another thought. But the real kicker was that every time he tried to track him down, the signal

signal was lost

was jammed. Donald was no computer whiz, and he didn't have any tech gurus in his entourage. So, was it possible the Davis household had a signal jammer?

It struck Curtis as odd for an average family to have such a device, one designed to shield from tracking.

Moreover, if even he couldn't crack the interference, it meant this was no ordinary jammer.

Curtis furrowed his brow, about to voice his concerns when he met his boss' gaze and promptly clammed up. If he could think of it, surely his boss had as well.

James' intense gaze turned toward Donald. "Shall I drive you back to Riverdale tomorrow?"

The mention of leaving had Donald thumping his cane on the ground with force. "You cheeky brat, I've just arrived, and you're already trying to boot me out?"

"You don't have much to keep you entertained here," James remarked coolly.

"I don't need you fussing over me. I've made up my mind to stay put for a month or two. Leaving is out of the question."

With that, Donald rose to his feet and turned to Wyatt. "Where's my room? Show me where I can rest."

After glancing at James for approval, Wyatt hurried over to assist Donald.

James pinched the bridge of his nose, his silence lingering. What a headache.

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Back in the living room, Mirabella saw Shawn tidying up the chess set. After a moment's thought, she joined in the cleanup and casually asked, "Dad, were you and Mom putting on an act with Donald yesterday?"

Shawn paused to pick up the chess pieces and looked up at his daughter with a smile. "Not exactly."

After a brief pause, he continued, "At first, we thought the call from Donald to your phone was from someone back home. He reminded us so much of an old acquaintance, and when you said you didn't know him, we didn't want to blow his cover without understanding why he suddenly showed up."

Mirabella touched her nose. "So, you do know him."

"Yep," Shawn nodded, his expression turning serious as he thought of the Shepherd family. "If you run into Donald again, try to steer clear, will you?" He was worried that Mirabella's casual references to Donald might ruffle his feathers.

Dropping the last of the chess pieces into the box, Mirabella didn't press further, simply replying, "Sure, got it."

A look of relief washed over Shawn's face as he watched his obedient daughter. Thinking of how Zach wouldn't be home anytime soon, his spirits lifted even further, and he suggested, "Since it's Saturday, how about we go out for dinner and then hit a karaoke bar for a few hours?"

At the mention of karaoke, Mirabella glanced at the time on her wristwatch and remembered, "Dad, did you forget about Leo's flight at three today? He should be almost home by now."

Shawn's face fell. Zach was out of the picture, and now Leo was coming back—life sure was full of surprises.

After Mirabella finished speaking, she noticed Shawn's expression was none too pleased. Although puzzled, she didn't press the matter. She had grown accustomed to his mercurial moods.

Ten minutes later, Leo walked through the front door, his agent Collins in tow. When Leo entered the living room and spotted Mirabella and Shawn, he greeted them warmly. "Hey, Dad, Mirabella, I'm back."

"Hello Leo" Mirabella stood up to pour him a glass of water and nodded at Collins, offering him one as well.

Shawn just grunted a vague acknowledgment before heading upstairs. Watching his father's retreating figure, Leo felt an unmistakable chill of unwelcome in the air. Scratching his nose, Leo was baffled. He'd been away for a few days. Shouldn't Shawn be a bit more cheerful about his return?

Puzzled, Leo turned to his sister and asked, "Mirabella, is Dad in a bad mood today?"

"No, he seemed pretty okay to me."

"Huh, guess it was just me then." Leo shook his head and settled into the couch.

Having finished his water, Collins pulled out a contract from his briefcase. "Mira, here's that sports brand ad contract. Take a look." He handed the document to Mirabella, who lit up as if she were holding a treasure.

"I've skimmed through it already, and there are no major issues. Just need your signature," Collins added.

Mirabella quickly flipped through the contract, pausing a full minute to review the section detailing the ad's payout. Then, without hesitation, she flipped to the last page, grabbed a pen, and signed her

name.

Leo watched, his expression a mix of emotions. "You sure you don't want to think it over?"

Mirabella shot him a look and said seriously, "What's there to think about? Five million for a single ad. How can you even question that? Don't you know how hard it is to earn money these days?"

Leo, feeling oddly chastised, had no response. Their family was hardly short on cash, after all.

Shaking her head, Mirabella imparted, "Leo, we've got to make money while we can."

Collins nearly choked on his laughter at her earnest charade. What a gem of a sister. He suddenly understood why Leo was so fond of

her.

Clearing his throat, Collins took the signed contract from Mirabella. "Alright, it's settled then. I'll talk to the brand on Monday and try to schedule the shoot for Saturday. It won't interfere with your studies."

Mirabella waved her hand dismissively, "No worries. If it's during the week, I can take a day off." When it came down to a hefty paycheck or school, she could afford to choose the paycheck from time to time.

Leo watched his sister, bemused at her enthusiasm for wealth.

"Yep," Mirabella nodded, then quickly added, "The sooner we shoot, the better." The sooner the shoot, the sooner the payday.

Leo massaged his temples, stunned by his sister's blatant materialism.

"Okay, I'm off then. I'll pick you guys up early tomorrow," Collins said, grabbing his briefcase and heading out.