

The Double 481

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Sticking to the principle of politeness, Asher didn't bother to question Mirabella's words. Instead, he offered a smile and said, "Dad, even Mirabella admits it's tough. Maybe we shouldn't brag in front of everyone."

The fool!

Nikolai took a deep breath to suppress the annoyance welling up in his chest, waved his hand dismissively, and said, "Just get out of here. Don't dampen the mood."

Asher noticed that his father was indeed getting heated. Having achieved his own goal, he quickly excused himself.

As Nikolai watched him leave, he let out a small sigh, no longer in the mood to bring up the Foxglove. "My son doesn't know any better. I apologize for his behavior."

"It's alright," Mirabella said with a pressed-lip smile, not taking it to heart. Then she stood up and excused herself, "I'm going to visit the powder room." She soon left the main hall.

Nikolai's gaze returned to the table, his aged face momentarily showing a bittersweet smile as he sighed, "So narrow-minded."

James glanced at Nikolai, his serene face showing little emotion. "It's just his nature."

Nikolai shook his head. "Let's not talk about him. It'll only spoil the mood."

With a deliberate calm, James poured Nikolai a cup of tea. "Have some tea."

Nikolai took the cup, quietly sipped, and then raised his head to look at James again.

After a thoughtful moment, he said, "It seems, James, that you've recovered quite a bit. Has Mirabella given you any more acupuncture treatments lately?"

James leaned back in his chair, exuding a relaxed but impeccably polite air, and hummed in affirmation.

A knowing look crossed Nikolai's face, and after a pause, he remarked, "Mirabella's silver needle technique is truly extraordinary. I've never seen such a reversal of practice." Although he had only witnessed the initial needle insertion and not the crucial probing phase, the points chosen for the needles were enough to demonstrate her exceptional skill.

James raised his eyebrows, a bit surprised. "You've never seen this method of acupuncture before?"

Nikolai nodded, "Indeed, her technique is quite unique, almost transcending the existing theories of alternative medicine."

At this point, Nikolai's thoughts drifted to the legendary Massolio family. While little was known about their secrets, it was rumored that the family's pride lay in their silver needle technique, a technique capable of pulling people back from death's door.

However... these were just stories passed down by the older generations, with no one certain of their veracity. Mirabella's method, though unique, probably had no connection to that family. After all, whether the Massolio family even existed in this world remained a mystery.

Nikolai reeled in his wandering thoughts, choosing not to voice his baseless speculations. With a smile, he added, "Each generation has its talents. I must admit, I am getting old and must concede."

James regarded Nikolai and simply responded, "You're being too m You're be modest."

Nikolai shook his head and then stood up. "Just sit tight, James. I'm going to check in on the kitchen. Khox's grandson is head chef

today, and I want to see how he's doing."

James nodded slightly.

Soon after, Nikolai took his leave.

Meanwhile, Mirabella had asked one of the Mendoza family servants for directions to the restroom. On her return to the main hall, she ran into Asher again. He was in conversation with one of Knox's apprentices.

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Asher watched the pair walk away, his gaze lingering until he shook his head, a dazed smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. It was one thing for his old man to have a soft spot for the girl, but Knox, too?

Turning to Vicky, he quirked an eyebrow and asked, "So, are that girl and Knox tight?"

Vicky's gaze was cool, detached. "My mentor's thinking of taking her on as an apprentice. His voice was tinged with a frosty edge.

Asher's eyes bulged in disbelief. "You're saying Knox wants to take her under his wing?"

Vicky wasn't keen on dwelling on the subject. He just grunted in acknowledgment, but noticing Asher's baffled look, he asked, albeit belatedly, "You know Mirabella?"

Asher hesitated before nodding, then quickly shook his head. "Not exactly, It's my dad who knows her." He refrained from mentioning how his father was not Mirabella's apprentice. It was a bit too much for his pride.

"Hmm." Vicky checked his watch, clearly done with the conversation. "I need to get back to work. We'll touch base on pharmacology when I've got a minute."

Asher nodded and made his way to the main hall.

Meanwhile, Knox ushered Mirabella into the kitchen.

Vincent, clad in a crisp white chef's coat instead of his school uniform, looked every inch the part as he bustled around the stove. He was oblivious to the new arrivals. It wasn't until he spun around to grab some ingredients that he spotted Mirabella and his grandfather.

His cheeks tinged pink at the sight of Mirabella. He greeted her before turning to his granddad. "Gramps, Mirabella here's a guest. Bringing her into the kitchen isn't quite proper."

Knox shot him a glare. "What's improper about it? Mirabella's no stranger."

Just then, Nikolai emerged from the main hall and entered the kitchen. He was surprised to see Mirabella. "Oh! Mirabella, my mentor, you're here too?"

As Mirabella turned to speak, Knox, hearing Nikolai's reference, interjected with confusion, "Wait, what did you call her?"

Had he misheard? Calling her his mentor? And since when did Nikolai act like he knew Mirabella so well?

Knox eyed Nikolai suspiciously, feeling like he'd missed out on some inside joke.

Nikolai, stroking his graying beard and raising an eyebrow, said simply, "Yeah, she's my little mentor."

Knox's eyes widened, his mind reeling. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Was Nikolai calling Mirabella mentor? Shouldn't it be the other way around?

"It means exactly what it sounds like," Nikolai explained. Then, without warning, he stepped forward and grabbed Knox's wrist. "Let me take your pulse... Your pulse is fine, so why isn't your brain keeping up?"

Feeling inexplicably attacked, Knox yanked his hand away and aimed a slap. "Cut it out!"

Dodging the slap, Nikolai snorted, "Just trying to help since you're hot getting you ungrateful old coot."

Knox shot him a cold glance, then softened as he looked back at m Mirabella. "Mirabella, when did you get

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Mirabella was eyeing the array of healing herbs laid out beside her when Knox nudged her, causing her to pause momentarily. Without lifting her gaze, she drawled, "Aren't we acquainted enough for a casual chat?"

Knox choked on his words, realizing that wasn't the kind of response he had been fishing for.

Already by Vincent's side, Mirabella peered at the simmering stew pot on the stove, with a faint herbal aroma wafting through the air. After a brief two-second pause, she suggested, "Vincent, why don't you toss in a bit of Solomon's Seal?"

Vincent glanced at Mirabella. "Solomon's Seal?"

She nodded affirmatively.

Vincent went over to a box, scooped up a pinch of Solomon's Seal, and asked, "Is this amount about right?"

Mirabella, with an appraising look, replied, "Pretty close."

Soon, Vincent had rinsed the Solomon's Seal and added it to the pot. He didn't question Mirabella's advice; it was as if anything she said was gospel to him. The dominating aura she had was too strong.

Standing aside and watching the two converse with such ease, Knox suddenly felt a glimmer of hope for taking on an apprentice. He stepped back, positioning himself next to Nikolai, arms crossed, and whispered, "Hey, Niko, don't you think Mirabella would make a fine... culinary herbalist?"

Nikolai turned his head, giving Knox a sidelong glance. "What nonsense are you spouting now?"

The guy wanted Mirabella, a top-notch potion master and a brilliant medic to boot, to be a cook. He sure had wild dreams.

Didn't Knox hear him addressing Mirabella as his mentor already?

Feeling scrutinized by Nikolai's gaze, Knox was puzzled, "What's with that look?"

Nikolai looked away, stroking his beard. "Nothing, just a suggestion. You might want to sleep with your head elevated tonight."

"Why did you just call Mirabella your mentor?" Knox circled back to the conversation at hand.

Nikolai flashed a knowing smile, "I'm not telling you."

Knox got agitated. The biggest regret of his life was getting to know this darn old man.

Nikolai's phone buzzed in his pocket, and he walked away to take the call.

Mirabella and Vincent continued discussing various dishes. As one spoke, the other listened, oblivious to whatever the two elder men were talking about at the door. Before long, Mirabella stopped distracting Vincent from his cooking and stepped out of the kitchen.

As she crossed the threshold, she was met by Knox's plaintive gaze. She looked at him, puzzled.

Knox glanced at Nikolai, still on the phone, his mind fixated on the 'little mentor nickname. After a few seconds of thought, he bluntly asked Mirabella, "That old guy is your apprentice?"

Mirabella, slightly taken aback, realized Knox must've been referring to Nikolai. After a moment of silence,

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Knox was gobsmacked. What did she mean by not taking disciples?

Knox swallowed hard and tentatively inquired, "Does he want to become your apprentice?"

Mirabella recalled how Nikolai had asked several times about taking on a disciple and how she hadn't agreed, leading to his insistence on calling her little mentor. After a brief hesitation and another appraising look at Knox, she nodded in confirmation to prevent any similar misunderstandings, "Yes, I don't take disciples"

After a moment, she added, "Nor do I seek a master'

Knox should have been disheartened by her last statement, nor do I seek a master'. Still, his mind was completely absorbed by the revelation that Nikolai wanted to apprentice under Mirabella: This left him utterly dumbfounded

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Who is Nikolai, you ask? The one they called the Grandmaster of Alternative Healing, a veritable legend in alternative medicine, and heir to a dynasty of healers. The line of would-be apprentices eager to learn from him could stretch down Main Street! Nikolai needing a mentor was unheard of!

Sure, Mirabella seemed well-versed in pharmacology, but... the idea that a celebrated old-school healer like Nikolai would seek guidance from her was mind-boggling.

Knox watched Mirabella silently before finally asking, "You know a bit about healing arts, don't you? His tone was matter-of-fact.

Without blinking, Mirabella replied, "A little... bit."

"Heh," Knox chuckled emotionlessly. If it were just 'a little bit, Nikolai would probably, at most, want to take her as his apprentice, not immediately hail her as 'little mentor. After all, Nikolai was not the kind of guy to throw around titles as a joke.

'No wonder when I mentioned that Mirabella would make a fine culinary herbalist, that old-timer gave me such a strange look. He must have been in on the joke! Knox mused.

Thinking about it, it was not too far-fetched that a young woman with such deep knowledge of pharmacology would be adept in the healing arts. Some things were better left unexamined. Knox didn't say another word about apprenticeship, hands clasped behind his back as he strolled into the kitchen.

To think of taking someone as an apprentice when even Nikolai wants to call her little mentor? It was like something out of a fantasy.

I Mirabella blinked, watching Knox's retreating figure with a hint of puzzlement, but soon, she redirected her gaze and left the kitchen.

Nikolai had just finished a phone call, his expression grave. As Mirabella walked by, he glanced at her and opened his mouth as if to say something. Instead, he asked, "Mirabella, are you heading back to the main hall now?"

Giving Nikolai a closer look, Mirabella noticed a sudden worry in his eyes. She didn't ask further, just nodded and hummed a soft agreement.

Knowing there was nothing left for him in the kitchen, Nikolai pocketed his phone and, with a restored smile, suggested, "Let's go together."

Mirabella nodded slightly.

As they left for the main hall, Knox, now in the kitchen, turned to his bustling grandson. "Vincent, I have something to ask you."

Surprised by his grandfather's sudden geniality, Vincent nearly fumbled the spatula. "Yes, go ahead."

Knox cleared his throat and paused before saying, "When I told you to ask Mirabella to consider the apprenticeship yesterday, you..."

Before Knox could finish, Vincent, understanding the hint, interjected, "I've already spoken to her, Grandpa. Don't worry. I'll handle anything you entrust to me promptly."

Knox, speechless with an unvoiced 'I bet you didn't mention it, thought to himself. Why was it that this kid never showed any initiative with chores but was suddenly so eager now?

Knox shook his head in dismay and walked away.

One moment, he was all smiles.

Back in the hall, Mirabella settled into her previous seat.

James raised an eyebrow at her. "You were gone a while, huh?"

"I made a trip to the kitchen." She picked up her cup from the table and drained it.

James nodded, his slender fingers reaching for the jug beside him to refill her cup.

"Thank you," Mirabella said, grateful.

The dinner hadn't started yet, and she took out her phone to check a couple of missed calls and several messages.

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The missed calls and several messages were from the same person - Leo's agent, Collins Mirabella tapped open Messenger, Collins: [Mirabella, the schedule for the sports brand commercial shoot is set.

Collins: [It's tomorrow.]

Collins: [Tomorrow at 10 AM. Can you get the day off? If it's too much hassle, I can swing by your school and sort it out for you.]

Collins: [You there?]

Mirabella checked the time stamps. The last message was sent half an hour after the previous ones. She pondered for a moment. Taking a day off shouldn't be a problem, so she replied directly via Messenger. [Had my phone on silent, didn't notice. Tomorrow should be fine.]

No sooner had she hit send than a little red exclamation mark popped up in the chat box, with a line of text underneath. [Message sent, but rejected by the recipient.]

Mirabella: [?]

Still, that red exclamation mark showed up. Holding her phone, Mirabella was a bit stunned. She looked up, incredulous, and waved her phone in front of James. "Can you make heads or tails of this for me? Was it what she thought it was? Had she been blocked?"

James glanced at Mirabella before his eyes settled on her phone screen, only to see the failed message prompt. His gaze then shifted to the nickname at the top. [Collins Was she texting a guy?]

James' eyes narrowed slightly, his voice cool and subdued. "Looks like he's blocked you"

A look of 'I thought as much' crossed Mirabella's face. She was used to blocking others, being on the receiving end was a novel experience.

She took back her phone, clearly miffed. Was she blocked for not replying to a Messenger message right away? Collins never struck her as the hot-headed type.

James raised an eyebrow and casually asked, "A friend of yours?" He hadn't seen the message about the commercial shoot at the top.

While closing Messenger and pulling up Collins's contact, Mirabella answered, "My brother's agent." With that, she hit the call button. James, hearing this, said no more, the sharpness in his expression fading away. Soon, the call connected.

"Collins, if you've got an issue with me, just spit it out," said Mirabella, her opening line. Her voice held a tinge of frustration but eerily lacked any real displeasure. She wasn't about to let a little blocking incident cost her the commercial fee. It was just a block, after all. She was easygoing and didn't hold grudges. Collins, just picking up the call, nearly dropped his phone at her bafflingly ominous greeting. It took him a

moment to collect his wits. "... No, Mira, have you got the wrong end of the stick about something?" His panic was palpable as if he'd committed some unforgivable sin.

While listening to Collins' cautious tone, Mirabella tapped her nose, puzzled for a moment then explained, "I was out and about, so I had my phone on silent, didn't see your messages. I just replied to you and found out you rejected my message."

"What? Rejected? That can't be right, sis. Why would I reject your m

essages? Collins was utterly eggs? confused, then decisively put the call on speaker and started tapping on his phone screen to open

Messenger.

Just as Leo walked out of the music room, he caught Collins' words, m

'rejected your message, paused mid-step, then silently turned back and re-entered the music room,

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Collins tapped on his conversation with Mirabella, scanning for any irregularities. Finding none, he casually remarked, "My Messenger's working just fine. Why don't you send another message to double-check?"

Mirabella responded by sending an emoji, which, to her frustration, bounced back, "Looks like I'm on your block list."

The mention of being blocked suddenly reminded her of a certain goofball she had blocked on her own Messenger list.

"Blocked? Why on earth would I block you..." Collins began with a chuckle, shaking his head in disbelief as he navigated to his settings and checked the block list. His speech trailed off abruptly when he spotted Mirabella's nickname among the blocked contacts Holy smokes, this was some kind of witchcraft! Since when had he ever blocked Mirabella?

Rubbing his eyes, Collins began to suspect he'd stumbled into the most bizarre mystery of the year. quickly unblocked her.

"Mirabella, I swear I had no idea you were blocked. I would never do such a low- down thing." Collins explained with utmost seriousness. After all, it was more likely for Leo to end up on that list than Mirabella.

He Mirabella, although baffled, decided not to dwell on the issue. "No biggie. I should be able to get out of tomorrow morning's shoot. I'll ask for a personal day"

"Alright, I'll swing by and pick you up at nine," Collins said:

"Cool."

With the call ended, Collins stared at his phone screen, lost in thought. He couldn't for the life of him figure out why he had blocked Mirabella.

Shaking his head to clear it, he looked around the open space that served as both a living and dining room before his gaze drifted toward the studio. A look of confusion crossed his face Weird, wasn't Leo just here when I was on the phone? Where'd he vanish to?

On the other end, Mirabella sent a text to Annette, asking for a day off Given her stellar academic record and Annette's impression of her as a particularly well-behaved student, Annette didn't hesitate to approve the request, even without a reason provided in the message.

With a slight smile and a lighter heart, Mirabella put away her phone as the Mendoza family's dinner party got underway. Considering James' status, Knox hadn't placed Mirabella and James at the main table, but they weren't seated with other guests either—a gesture of special treatment. Feeling peckish, Mirabella didn't stand on ceremony once the food was served. She dove in, focusing on her meal.

The dinner included a round of toasts, starting with the hosts and followed by the guests at their own pace.

Asher's eyes occasionally drifted over to Mirabella and James' table, and after a while, he approached with a glass of wine in hand, his intention clear as day.

"Hi Mr. James," Asher said, nodding respectfully with a smile plastered across his face.

James, busy serving Mirabella some food, took his time responding. Finally, he set down the utensils and looked up at Asher. "I'll pass on the drink, thanks," James said coolly.

Asher's hand stiffened around his wine glass, his smile freezing in place. After a few awkward seconds, his voice came out a bit parched.

"Water, then. Water is fine."

James took a casual sip from his cup of tea, set it down, and withdrew his gaze.

conversation without another word.

effectively ending the

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Asher stood there, awkward as ever, caught between a rock and a hard place. To drink or not to drink—that was the question. His every move seemed to amplify his discomfort under the indifferent gaze of James. It was obvious to him that James was deliberately ignoring him, acting as if he didn't even exist.

After a moment of hesitation, Asher took the plunge and downed his drink. Clearing his throat, he ventured, "Mr. James, if you ever find yourself with some free time, you're welcome to drop by the Reeves estate."

James hardly looked up, offering only a noncommittal grunt, his tone laced with a hint of impatience that was hard to miss.

Mirabella, who had been enjoying her meal, glanced up at Asher, then gave a mysterious look that swept from him to Asher and back again before she returned to her dinner.

Asher caught that brief exchange of looks and frowned. In the past, James had always treated him with a courtesy befitting his father's reputation, but today, things were different. His gaze shifted to Mirabella, suspecting that she might have whispered something in James' ear. At that moment, Asher's already nonexistent fondness for Mirabella plummeted into the negatives.

Then Vincent, having shed his chef's apron, entered the main hall. His eyes scanned the room before heading straight for Mirabella's table. Upon spotting Asher, Vincent nodded politely. "Asher."

That simple acknowledgment broke the awkward silence that had enveloped Asher. With a serene smile, Asher gathered himself. "Vincent, your culinary skills have really come a long way under your grandfather's tutelage. Impressive, truly."

Vincent's lips twitched into a modest smile. "Thank you, Asher. You flatter me."

Then Vincent turned to Mirabella, pulled out the chair beside her without the formalities and sat down. "Mirabella, how do you find the dishes tonight?" His eyes were bright and clear, still holding the innocence of a teenager.

James, sitting nearby, cast a cursory glance at Vincent. A schoolmate, perhaps?

Mirabella set down her utensils and nodded. "Quite good. A significant improvement over your last stint at the health food restaurant. You're ready to fly solo."

Vincent blushed at the praise, the color creeping onto his cheeks. "There's still so much to learn."

Mirabella raised an eyebrow. "You have a talent for this. You should delve into some pharmacology books."

Vincent perked up at the suggestion, "Any recommendations?"

"Tell you what, I'll send you a list on Messenger. You can pick them up at the bookstore or check them out from the library," Mirabella offered.

Vincent sat up straighter. "Sounds good."

Mirabella smiled and resumed eating.

Asher, who had lingered and overheard the exchange, was taken aback to find that Mirabella was schoolmates with Knox's grandson and that there seemed to be a sense of admiration in the young man's eyes when he looked at her.

Suddenly, Asher's view of Mirabella became even more complicated. She was just a high school student with a knack for pharmacology, wasn't she? Why did everyone seem to treat her as something special?

Feeling like a ghost in the room, Asher didn't want to overstay his welcome. He was about to slip away when his father approached with a grave expression.

"Asher," Nikolai spoke in a hushed tone, urgency written all over his face. "We'

"We've got an important patient back at the house. We need to leave now."

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Asher noted the rare solemnity in his father's voice and, without further thought, nodded in agreement.

"Alright."

Nikolai then turned to James, addressing him with a respectful nod, "Mr. James, Ms. Mirabella, do drop by the Reeves residence when you have a moment. Got some family matters to attend to, so I'll be off." With that that, Nikolai didn't wait for James and Mirabella to respond and hurried away.

Mirabella watched Nikolai's retreating figure for a few seconds before her gaze drifted away. Vincent, who had been sitting beside her, didn't leave. Instead, he kept the conversation going about the math competition, "You know, Mirabella, that competition..."

He trailed off, then looked up, his handsome face showing a touch of confusion. James seemed to be watching him with a strange intensity.

Not knowing James well enough to inquire directly, Vincent simply nodded politely when their eyes met. James hardly touched his food, focusing instead on helping Mirabella with hers. He nodded back at Vincent, his movements smooth and practiced as if it was second nature to him.

met.

Noticing this, a hint of surprise crossed Vincent's eyes, and now he found himself curious about the relationship between Mira and this enigmatic guest.

Just then, the birthday boy Knox approached, with Vincent's mother Aimee trailing behind him. Knox took a seat next to James, "James, we've had quite the turnout today. I hope we haven't neglected you."

James' lips curved ever so slightly, his handsome face polite. "You're too kind, Knox."

Knox chuckled and pointed to Vincent. "This is my good-for-nothing grandson, Vincent. He prepared today's meal. How is it? To your liking?"

Cued, Vincent thought, "Heh, so Grandpa tells outsiders I'm good-for-nothing"

glance at his grandfather, momentarily questioning their blood relation.

"It's quite good," James responded, his tone neutral.

Vincent cast a silent

"I've tried to teach the boy how to cook, but he just doesn't take it. Otherwise, his skills would be even better," Knox said, seemingly critical of his grandson but clearly proud.

James nodded, picking up his cup for a sip.

Aimee, witnessing James for the first time, was struck by his appearance and presence, yet her attention was ther drawn more to Mirabella. The young girl was exceptionally pretty, especially her bright and intelligent eyes, which hinted at her well-mannered nature.

Women often felt an additional affinity for beauty, and Aimee was no exception. But after a few morem glances she felt a strange familiarity in the child's features, as if she'd seen her somewhere before, yet she was sure their paths had never crossed,

Mirabella, sensing Aimee's gaze, looked up. "Good evening." At over forty, Aimee retained a youthful N elegance, her skin well-maintained, and she could easily pass for someone in her thirties.

Aimee's train of thought was interrupted by Mirabella's voice.

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Aimee snapped back to reality, shaking off the fleeting sense of familiarity. She flashed a warm smile at Mirabella, whose coat had fallen open slightly to reveal the emblem of Parkside High School on her uniform. A flicker of surprise crossed Aimee's eyes.

Glancing at her son Vincent, who was seated beside the girl, Aimee couldn't help but ask, "Are you two schoolmates?"

Vincent stood up from his chair, and after a brief pause, he replied, "Yeah, we're in the same grade but in different classes."

Aimee was taken aback by this revelation. Her son had always been rather aloof, known for his straightforward nature and academic brilliance, which unfortunately resulted in a sparse circle of friends, let alone female classmates.

'The girl must be quite the scholar, Aimee thought to herself.

After exchanging a few more words with Mirabella, who seemed rather reserved, Aimee decided not to press further.

Once dinner was finished, James and Mirabella didn't linger at the Mendoza household. They bid Knox farewell and departed.

With the guests gone, Aimee finally found a moment to sit down, massaging her sore shoulders and arms. She turned to her son, who also looked exhausted, and said with a hint of pride, "Vincent, you did really well today."

Vincent, leaning back with his head against the chair, managed only a feeble wave in response to his mother's praise.

Aimee took a sip of water from a glass nearby and casually inquired, "By the way, what's the name of that girl you sat next to?" Although she had chatted with Mirabella, Aimee had not asked for her name.

Vincent straightened up and looked at his mother, perplexed by the sudden question. "Why do you want to know?"

"What's wrong with being curious?" Aimee retorted with a raised eyebrow.

Vincent touched his nose. "Her name's Mirabella Davis."

"Mirabella?" Aimee echoed, then probed further, "Which Davis family is your classmate from?"

Vincent paused, taken aback.

"I mean, what's her family background?" Aimee clarified.

Guests invited to Knox's birthday party were usually from well-known families or influential figures. Aimee assumed Mirabella was the child of one such family, as there were several prominent households with the Davis surname in Radiant Ridge.

Vincent realized what his mother was asking and replied, "I haven't paid much attention to that. Not sure."

"Oh," Aimee responded, dropping the subject.

After dropping Mirabella off at the Davis family's gate, Mirabella remembered she had something for

James and said, "Wait for me. I'll get the incense for you." James wanted to say there was no rush, but Mirabella had already walked away. He held his tongue.

Minutes later, Mirabella reemerged, holding a nondescript plastic tube. She passed it through the car window. "Let me know if you need more."

James quietly looked at her for a moment before responding. "Will do."

"Bye, sweet dreams," Mirabella said cheerfully, waving at James.

Once Mirabella's figure vanished from sight, James turned his gaze back to the plastic tube on the seat adorned with a cookie brand's label, and his lips twitched. In the past, she might have used a wooden box, which, while not fancy, at least looked proper. Now... it seemed even the pretense was gone.

Shaking his head, James instructed Wyatt to drive next door.

Donald hadn't gone to bed yet. He was in the living room, engaged in a game of chess with Curtis.

Curtis, who had been thoroughly trounced most of the evening sprang to his feet as James entered. It was like a man seeing a lifeline.