

The Double (or More ?) Life of The Fake Heiress

#Chapter 51 - Read The Double (or More ?) Life of The Fake Heiress Chapter 51

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Grandma Catherine watched as James remained silent, with a bittersweet smile tugging at her lips. She spoke again, and her voice trailed off into the quiet room. "Mira brought over a bunch of groceries to see me first thing this morning. Only, she didn't expect to run into her foster mother... My daughter's always been harsh, never had a soft spot for Mira. She said some really hurtful things, so the poor child didn't even stay for a full hour before my daughter drove her away."

"She must've been angry, and that's why she didn't come herself." Tears welled up in Grandma Catherine's eyes as she clung to James' arm, refusing to let go as if releasing him would mean losing the only listener she had left.

James observed Catherine, who was sinking into a pit of guilt, and pieced together the events. No wonder Mira had asked him to deliver the package.

However, Mira, who was wise beyond her years, didn't seem like someone easily upset.

When Grandma Catherine's emotions had settled a bit, James said gently, "Don't worry too much. Mira probably just didn't want to bump into your daughter again. That's likely why she asked me to bring these things to you."

Grandma Catherine paused, "Really?" James nodded. His inherently cool demeanor and deep eyes exuded a persuasive sincerity.

The uneasy and pained feelings that had clouded Grandma Catherine's heart began to dissipate. Her gaze fell upon the wooden box James had placed on the coffee table. She stood up and walked over, picking up the box without much regard for James' presence. She pressed the latch on the side, opening it to reveal the contents. A warm smile spread across her face almost instinctively.

Her granddaughter hadn't abandoned her; Mira still cared deeply for her wellbeing. Noticing her sleep had been troubled, Mira had sent over soothing incense, even after today's unpleasant encounter.

Grandma Catherine dabbed at her eyes, then closed the box and turned back to James, with a hint of embarrassment in her eyes. "I apologize for my earlier state. You must think it unseemly."

James' gaze lingered on the wooden box for a second longer before he met her eyes. "It's fine, completely understandable."

"Mira is indeed a good girl, worrying about my sleep and even going out of her way to buy me soothing incense... Alas, my daughter isn't fortunate enough to be her mother."

With a heavy sigh, Grandma Catherine shuffled to a nearby cabinet, pulling open a drawer to carefully place the wooden box inside.

James listened quietly to her ramblings, and his dark eyes were thoughtful.

Half an hour later, James left Catherine's house. Wyatt, seeing the pensive look on his face as he got into the car, couldn't help but ask, "Something happened?"

James regained his composure and glanced at Wyatt indifferently. "Nothing important."

Sensing James wasn't up for talking, Wyatt dropped the subject.

James' gaze was introspective. His fingers were tapping rhythmically on his knee. He took out his phone and texted Mirabella that the delivery was successful.

It took a good ten minutes before he received a terse "Thank you" reply from her. The reply was absent of any superfluous small talk.

A slight smile danced on James' lips. Anyway, he was accustomed to her aloofness. His slender fingers tapped out a message on his phone screen, [Where did you buy the soothing incense for your grandma? My grandparents back home have been having trouble sleeping too.]

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Mirabella was lost in her book, at least until she replied to James' message. After that, she just couldn't get back into it. She gazed at the new message from him on her phone, pondering for a brief moment before tapping out a response: [Oh, just snagged it online. I can shoot you the link to the store if you want.]

After a second thought. Mirabella opened up eBay, sifted through her favorites, and found the store she was looking for. She copied the link, flipped back to her Messenger app, and pasted it in for James.

When James received her reply, he dove into the online store she'd mentioned. The shop had a solid five-star rating, a mishmash of products, not a dedicated Incense retailer by any means. But the sandalwood and agarwood Incense boxes looked strikingly similar to the wooden box that old lady had. The prices were low, just over twenty bucks.

No exact matches were seen, but it was pretty clear that the calming incense the old lady had likely originated from this online vendor. However, if it was the legendary secret blend everyone whispered about, it wouldn't be peddled on some random website, nor would it be that cheap.

James closed the app, and felt a little displeased. In his dark eyes. It was hard to discern if it was disappointment or something else that dimmed their sparkle.

In the blink of an eye, half a month had whisked by since Mirabella had started at Parkside High School.

She was a bit of a free spirit, didn't really mingle with the other students, and didn't bother with extracurriculars. Her quiet demeanor had teachers labeling her as a paragon of obedience, while her peers saw her as the quintessential ice queen - a total enigma.

Her academic prowess was a mystery, but her looks? They were beyond reproach. Lately, though, rumors had started to swirl that she must've pulled some strings to get into Parkside.

In her own world, oblivious to the petty high school chatter, Mirabella didn't pay any of it any mind. But Jenna, her desk mate, was fuming when she heard the whispers. She almost went to set things straight before she turned

to see Mirabella, who was always with her nose in a book whether in class or out.

“I think they've got your whole vibe all wrong.” Jenna said seriously, propping her chin on her hands as she studied Mirabella. Mirabella lazily closed her textbook and turned her gaze on Jenna. Her eyebrows arched slightly. “Oh?”

That casual look from Mirabella sent a little thrill through Jenna. She swallowed hard, then retorted, “You're not an ice queen. You're a total bookworm!”

Flicking the corner of her book with a finger, Mirabella replied cryptically, “The path to wisdom is singular, and it's paved with study.”

Playing with her fingers, Jenna sighed, “I feel like you're hinting that I'm dumb, but I don't have proof.” Mirabella just smiled and didn't respond. Her phone on the desk buzzed, lighting up with two notifications for substantial money transfers. A quick glance was all it took for Mirabella to massage her temples in frustration. Again. It had been nearly half a month of daily transfers from that couple, as if they had money to burn. Jenna, who had been watching her, caught sight of those two glaringly large transfer notifications and couldn't help but quip. “Another day, another blinding glimpse of wealth.”

Mirabella was speechless.

That was right. Jenna had discovered a few days ago that her desk mate was getting these big—money transfers daily. and she had gone from initial shock to a numb acceptance.

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“Mirabella, spill the beans, girl Does your family own an oil field or something?” Jenna's words dripped with jealousy. With a sly arch of her brow, Mirabella casually picked up her phone, unlocked it with a quick swipe of her thumb, and with Jenna watching, she nonchalantly accepted a tidy sum of ten grand from Delilah and Shawn via Messenger. The sheer audacity of her movements was enough to leave anyone agape.

Jenna's jaw dropped. "Oh my God!" Oh, how she wanted to murder her desk—mate not only swipe every penny from her Messenger, but also hog her billionaire parents all to herself!

"Ugh, it's downright maddening to compare yourself to others." Jenna sighed dramatically, feigning sorrow. "Why can't I have a pair of filthy—rich parents doting on their princess, huh?"

Mirabella turned her head, flicking her bangs away from her forehead with a nonchalant grace. Her eyes sparkled with an enticing glint as she quipped, "You may not have tycoon parents, but there's still a chance for you to be a tycoon mommy to some spoiled child."

Jenna choked on her own laughter and threw her a thumbs-up. Whoever said her desk—mate was just a pretty face must not have heard her razor-sharp wit.

Mulling over the recent rumors, Jenna shifted closer to Mirabella. Her playful expression from moments before was replaced by one of genuine concern. "Speaking of which, there's some gossip going around about you. Have you heard?"

Mirabella raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "What gossip?"

After pondering for a brief moment, Jenna said, "Rumor has it that your grades are nothing to brag about, that you can't even match up to the average Joe in class, and that you got into this school through some backdoor shenanigans."

Parkside High School wasn't like the neighboring Maple Academy; it was a place for the true academic cream of the crop. The school's rules were strict, and its principal was famously unbending and iron—fisted. The idea of someone sneaking in through the backdoor was practically unheard of at Parkside.

However, the rumor about Mirabella's using such means was now the scandalous exception, challenging the integrity of Parkside's reputation. Rumors are often harmless, but when they attack the honor of an institution, they become a serious matter.

Considering how Mirabella's parents seemed to be showering her with money transfers daily, Jenna couldn't help but suspect that there might be a kernel of truth to the whispers of nepotism.

Of course, she'd rather not believe such gossip, especially since her desk—mate's studious dedication was plain for all to see. Mirabella, catching Jenna's conflicted gaze, offered a sly smile and countered, "Do you believe it?"

"Me? Of course not," Jenna shook her head. "You're always buried in books. You're the quintessential bookworm. Anyone could be accused of sneaking in, but you're the least likely suspect."

Hearing Jenna's assessment, Mirabella could only chuckle and shake her head at the girl's Innocence.

While Mirabella remained utterly unfazed and unconcerned, Jenna voiced her frustration, "How can you be so calm? Wouldn't any normal person be upset about being bad—mouthed?"

Mirabella gave her a contemplative look before replying in a laid-back tone, "Rumors are squashed by the wise."

Jenna's mouth twitched with annoyance. "That's easy to say, but if this rumor keeps spreading, it could become a real headache. If those idiots take it to the principal, that would be a disaster."

After a pause, Jenna suddenly remembered something. Her eyes lit up as she faced Mirabella. "Actually, I might just have the perfect way to squash this rumor."

Mirabella's eyebrow quirked in interest. "Oh?"

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"Last week, the school's official forum announced a big deal the BrainSpark Nationals. It's like a whole tiered competition, starting with city—level prelims, then moving up to state, and finally the national showdown. The top three contenders get to wave the flag at the International stage." Jenna said while pulling out her phone, quickly logging onto the school's forum and finding the post. "Here, look at this."

“The deadline to sign up online is in a couple of days. I think you should throw your hat into the ring. With it being a national event, the cream of the crop will be there. We're not gonna get ahead of ourselves and talk about taking home the gold or anything, but making it through the city prelims alone would be a serious feather in your cap.”

Mirabella glanced at the phone Jenna handed her, gave it a cursory look, and flopped back onto her desk with a languid air. “Well, not interested.”

Jenna’s mouth twitched, and she nudged Mirabella’s arm. “Come on Mira, this could be your ticket to a clean slate, a real game-changer. It'd be a shame to miss out.”

Mirabella yawned and closed her eyes. “Then I’ll miss out.” She didn’t need a clean slate anyway.

Jenna sighed silently, looking at Mira, who seemed to care about nothing.

During the second period that afternoon, Mirabella was summoned to the office.

Annette, usually stern, softened her expression as she looked at the seemingly well-behaved Mirabella. “So, you're interested in the BrainSpark Nationals?”

Mirabella looked puzzled, with a question mark practically floating above her head.

“I wouldn’t normally recommend that someone who’s just transferred schools jump into a competition like this. But since you’ve signed up, I won’t try to stop you. Just make sure you carve out extra time for your studies, okay? This is your senior year, pivotal for your future.” Annette said with earnestness.

Mirabella’s mouth opened to say she hadn’t signed up, but then she remembered Jenna’s persuasive tactics from earlier that morning. After a few seconds of silence, she gave a noncommittal “hmm.”

Then, in a quieter tone, she asked, “Ms. Annette, what’s the prize for first place in this competition?”

Annette was taken aback as if she’d misheard.

Seeing Annette's confused expression, Mirabella understood the situation and her enthusiasm deflated. Her voice became listless, "I should head back to class."

"Wait." Annette regained her composure just as Mirabella was about to step out. "There's no cash prize, but the winner gets a guaranteed spot at Prestige College one of the top three universities in the country. A spot that many would break their backs for, given the limited admission spots each year. A guaranteed admission is worth way more than any cash prize."

Prestige College, a dream institution for many, represented a future that was beyond measure. But Mirabella, upon hearing her teacher's words, didn't seem thrilled. In fact, her shoulders slumped even more. Without looking back, she replied with a dull "got it" and left the office.

Annette watched Mirabella's retreating figure with a frown. She had a nagging feeling that this new student wasn't in it for the guaranteed college spot but the cash prize instead. But as soon as the thought crossed her mind, she laughed at herself. Was she crazy? Entertaining such a preposterous idea for a student who had essentially backdoored her way into the school? Shouldn't the focus be on advising her to know her limits?

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As the registration deadline for the BrainSpark Nationals approached, Annette gathered the signup sheets from The Advanced Class and handed them over to the vice principal.

The vice principal, after scanning the list, looked up with a puzzled frown. "Huh, is this it? Only a few kids from your class are participating?"

Out of the forty students in The Advanced Class, a mere three had signed up.

Annette chuckled awkwardly and explained. "I guess the kids prefer to focus on their studies rather than spend time on the competition."

The vice principal's gaze lingered on a few names before pausing at Mirabella's. He seemed surprised. "Isn't Mirabella the new girl? Why's she signed up for this? Shouldn't she be buckling down to catch up with the coursework at Parkside High School?"

Feeling the sting of discomfort. Annette replied, "Perhaps she's just looking for a challenge."

The vice principal seemed aware that Mirabella was a special admission by the principal himself, but he wasn't privy to her academic performance. However, he had heard a snippet from Morgan a few days prior, who painted her as someone with an ego larger than life. With a frown, he grumbled, "Nonsense!"

"The Education Association is taking this BrainSpark Nationals very seriously. If this transfer student excels and makes it to the city preliminaries, it's good. But if she doesn't, and other schools get wind that Parkside High School fielded a transfer just to make up the numbers, where's our pride then?"

Annette, seeing the vice principal's stern expression, agreed internally but still protested, "Isn't the competition open to everyone? It doesn't seem fair to exclude a transfer student."

The vice principal choked on his retort, "Regardless, her name has to be removed." Annette fell silent for a few seconds before hesitantly saying, "That... doesn't seem right." Running out of patience, the vice principal snapped. "There's nothing wrong with it."

Annette dropped her gaze. She knew Mirabella had been brought in through connections, and judging by the vice principal's attitude, he wasn't the one who had done it. That left one possibility... the principal himself.

If Mirabella found out her name had been removed without reason, would she go straight to the principal? And would Annette, as the advisor, end up being scolded first thing? With this in mind, Annette quickly suggested, "How about we consult the principal before deciding?"

At that, the vice principal flung the signup sheet onto the desk in frustration. "Are you saying I can't even handle this simple matter as the vice principal?"

Caught between respecting the principal and not offending the vice principal was a tricky business indeed! Feeling downhearted yet maintaining a placating smile, Annette said, "I didn't mean it that way, vice principal. It just seems unfair to cancel Mirabella's participation without cause..."

The vice principal huffed dismissively and cut her off, "Enough, you don't need to bother the principal. The name stays. Let's leave it at that."

Annette opened her mouth to protest, but the vice principal cut her off again, "If there's nothing else, you can go. I have matters to attend to." With a cold expression, he picked up the discarded signup sheet, strode to his desk, opened the drawer, and tossed it inside.

There was nothing more she could say, so Annette left the office, feeling awkward and disheartened.

The vice principal sank into his chair with a sour face. After a moment's reflection, a sneer curled at the edge of his lips as if he had come to some cunning realization. He was curious to see how this student from some backwater town would embarrass the principal in the end!

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Chapter 56 abella was clueless that she had been blacklisted as a troublemaker by the vice principal because

competition ramai, and with whispers flying around that she had used her connections to come here, her reputation was taking a hit. The students from both the Prodigy Class and the regular classes were giving her looks that dripped with contempt and disbelief.

Being a problem student and accused of pulling strings was the talk of the town, the stain on the school's good name. the epitome of embarrassment

So, when the list of students selected to participate in the BrainSpark Nationals was posted on the school bulletin board and Mirabella's name popped up, it turned into the juiciest gossip of the semester.

"Good Lord, where does the new girl get the guts to sign up for BrainSpark Nationals? Isn't she embarrassed?" "Does she think she can just charm her way into BrainSpark Nationals too?"

"I bet a nickel she won't even pass the prelims."

"My stars, looks like Parkside High is gonna be the laughing stock of the nation this time!"

"Seriously, wouldn't it be better to just sit pretty and not stir the

pot?"

Jenna was dumbfounded when she saw Mirabella's name on the list. "Queen Mira, | thought you said you weren't interested in BrainSpark Nationals? You even turned me down when | asked you to sign up." Jenna puffed her cheeks out in frustration. Her usually round face looked even rounder, like a petulant hamster.

Ever since Jenna found out about the hefty sums being transferred into Mirabella's account every day, she'd taken to calling her "Queen Mira" as a nickname, and it had stuck.

Mirabela looked at her with a puzzled expression. "Wasn't it you who signed me up?" Jenna blinked in confusion. "Nope, not me. | mean, | wanted you to compete, but | didn't put your name there."

Mirabella frowned. "Then who did?" Had she known it wasn't Jenna who signed her up, she would have flat-out refused when Annette called her to the office.

Scratching her head. Jenna reiterated with an innocent look. "Queen Mira, | swear | didn't sign you up. You gotta believe me." Mirabella glanced at her and said coolly, "I know."

Hearing this. Jenna stuck her tongue out slightly, worried about a misunderstanding, since BrainSpark Nationals was no child's play. She tilted her head in thought, and Jenna's inner detective kicked in, "Could it be someone wants to see you make a fool of yourself and did this on purpose?"

Mirabella's eyes lowered slightly, but she remained silent.

"The BrainSpark Nationals is for super intelligent students, the real brainlacs. If someone signed you up knowing your grades were dismal it's a surefire way to humiliate you at Parkside High School, and maybe even cut you off at the knees."

"Queen Mira, think, have you ticked anyone off lately?" Jenna folded her arms, getting straight to the point.

Mirabella's expression was serene, and her voice was quite serious. "Does being envied for my looks count?"

Jenna's mouth twitched. "Can you please be serious? | can't help you sort this out if you're gonna be like this." With a light "oh*", Mirabella then sprawled

back onto her desk and closed her eyes. Jenna was speechless. Queen Mira was uniquely nonchalant even in the gravest of times.

With a sigh, Jenna said helplessly. “Maybe you should talk to the She—Devil about this? The She—Devil was the students’ secret nickname for Annette, their head teacher.

Chapter 57 Without evening an eyelid, Mirabella responded, “It’s okay.”

Jenna was taken aback, then finally asked. “So you’re actually considering going through with the competition?”

Chapter 57

Chapter 57 Uh huh Mirabella replied nonchalantly, making it seem she had erased to wonder who had signed her up for the

Jenna blinked, skeptical. She didn’t doubt Mirabella had gotten into Parkside High School on her own merits, but she wasn’t quite convinced her friend was top of the class material

The list of students participating in the BrainSpark Nationals was a who’s who of academic titans, the top ten from each made Mirabella’s name on that list was like landfills in the midst of a pristine forest, no matter how shiny her medals, were they would be eclipsed by the brilliance of these scholarly giants.

Unless, of course, she could snag a state ranking.

“Are you up for this, Queen Mira? This competition is no joke, and you know how many people are just waiting to make you the butt of their jokes, Huh?” Jenna tried to talk her out of it. It was, after all, better to bow out now than to face the humiliation of flunking the prelims

Perhaps tired of Jenna’s nagging, Mirabella opened her eyes, propped herself up on the edge of the desk with a hand. and leaned in aggressively. Her eyes, dark and sparkling with a mischievous glint, met Jenna’s. Her voice was husky. “Don’t ask if someone’s up for it. Just don’t.”

Jenna, faced with Mirabella’s alluring gaze at such close quarters, felt her heart racing uncontrollably. The laid-back, almost wicked charm in that usually androgynous voice was unfairly seductive.

“Holy smokes,” she thought, “my heart’s about to burst out of my chest.”

Under Mirabella’s intense gaze, Jenna embarrassingly covered her face with her hands, and then slumped back into her seat. “Oh my gosh, Queen Mira, don’t look at me with those beguiling eyes again. I’m afraid | will fall in love with you!”

With a light chuckle, Mirabella found reprieve from Jenna’s chatter and sprawled out on the desk once more, even going so far as to cover her head with her chemistry textbook.

Jenna was flabbergasted, “You’re gonna scare off all your friends like that, Queen Mira!” Elsewhere. “Summer,

1. can you believe how delusional Mirabella is?” Madeline gossiped excitedly to Summer, who was quietly working on homework.

Summer paused, with a pen in the hand, and finally set it down to look at Madeline with curious eyes. “Hmm?

“She actually signed up for the BrainSpark Nationals. Madeline said. Her voice was filled with thrill and mockery. “I don’t know where she gets her confidence from. Everyone’s laughing at her.”

Summer’s delicate eyebrows raised slightly. She tilted her head and said calmly. “It’s an open competition. What’s there to laugh about?”

Madeline scoffed lightly. “Oh, you haven’t heard? The rumor is she got into Parkside High School through the back door. With her barely passing grades, It’s hilarious that she’d even consider competing.”

After a brief silence, Summer looked up again, with a probing tone in her voice. “Madeline, you didn’t start the rumor about Mirabella’s getting into Parkside High School through the back door, did you?”

Madeline’s eyes flickered guiltily, but she replied firmly. “Of course not. | would never say that.”

Summer smiled softly. “Good to hear. Mirabella is my friend, after all. Even if she’s not the best student, | don’t want people talking or laughing about her.”

Madeline's eyes betrayed a sense of "I knew it," and she quickly added, "You're also in the competition, Summer. Make sure you do well and aim for a state ranking!"

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Summer brushed a stray lock of hair from her cheek. Her eyelashes cast a delicate shadow over her serene expression. With a gentle smile, she murmured, "I'll do my best."

"With your grades, you've got this in the bag!" Madeline chimed in, never missing an opportunity to sing her praises.

Summer's face remained impassive. "The competition's fierce this time. We're talking about national whiz kids from all corners of the country."

"But you've got nothing to worry about," Madeline reassured her, "Parkside High School is top—liur nationally, and it we're talking about academic gods, you're the real deal."

Madeline winked and paused for dramatic effect before adding with a grin. "And look at you, the darling of Superstar Camp. If you snag a state or national ranking now, Just imagine the followers you'll rake in!"

Summer's double life as a Parkside High School scholar and a budding talent had been well-marketed by her agency, Half her fanbase were students who idolized her.

Imagine someone who's not only gorgeous and kind-hearted but can also sing, dance, and ace the BrainSpark Nationals. She was the epitome of a perfect girl in the eyes of many!

She radiated the youthful positivity, that made her a surefire blueprint for a school's poster child. "Mirabella, that lame girl, she's going to embarrass herself without any doubt," Madeline scoffed, already envisioning the scene. Summer just smiled at the comment, choosing not to add anything more,

The final bell rang. Mirabella and Jenna hadn't even left the school grounds when they spotted Summer, clad in Sunglasses, seemingly waiting for someone nearby.

Jenna's gossip radar went off. As they walked, she whispered to Mirabella, "See the girl at the gate with sunglasses?" Mirabella glanced over. "Yeah?"

"That's Summer, our school's celebrity sweetheart from Superstar Camp. You must've seen the show, right? She's the fan favorite."

Mirabella turned to Jenna with a raised eyebrow. "Are you one of her fans?"

Jenna shrugged and shook her head, "Not at all. Don't you think she's a bit too... fake? Like she's trying too hard to be something she's not. You know what I mean?"

Mirabella hummed noncommittally but then added after a pause, "I don't watch TV shows."

Jenna's eyes widened. "Holy cow, where have you been living, in the countryside? How can you not watch TV shows?" A sly smile played on Mirabella's lips as she asked, "Does watching TV shows boost your grades?"

Jenna was stumped by the question, unable to muster a response.

"And don't knock the countryside. It might just produce a lionhearted champion," Mirabella added with an enigmatic

tone. Jenna touched her nose, feeling suddenly out of sync in the conversation.

As they passed Summer, Mirabella barely glanced her way. She was tall and had a backpack casually slung over one shoulder. Her cool detached demeanor radiated a boldness that could outshine any boy's bravado.

From behind her sunglasses. Summer's gaze darkened for just a moment before she called out, "Mirabella, Emmitt's picking me up today. Let's walk out together,"

At Summer's invitation. Jenna's eyes sparkled with intrigue. The school's star was talking to Mirabella, and mentioning

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Mirabella paused mid—stride before turning to look at Summer. There was a cool detachment in her eyes, and her voice was chilly as she declined. “No, thanks. I’ll take the bus.” Without waiting for Summer to respond, she withdrew her gaze and walked towards the bus stop with a pace that was neither hurried nor slow.

Jenna, who had been watching the exchange with the enthusiasm of a spectator at a sports game, instinctively followed Mirabella. “Queen Mira, wait up for me!”

Summer's expression stiffened slightly, but her sunglasses concealed any sign of discomfort. She watched as Mirabella's silhouette grew smaller in the distance, and her grip on her bag tightened ever so slightly.

“Queen Mira, you know Summer, right?” Jenna asked with a certainty that belied her casual demeanor.

As Mirabella reached the bus stop and waited for the bus, she turned to face an eagerly gossiping Jenna and replied noncommittally, “Sort of.”

“Are you guys... related?” Jenna blinked, guessing boldly. But before Mirabella could respond, Jenna's face fell. “Oh no, oh no, Queen Mira, please tell me you won't rat me out to Summer for the comments | made?” In that moment, Jenna felt as if her heart was in a vise. After all, Summer had plenty of die-hard fans at Parkside High School who could drown her in their spitfire words if she crossed them.

Mirabella gave her a half-smiling glance. “Don't get ahead of yourself.”

Mirabella added as she stepped onto her usual bus, pulling out her transit card. “Are you sure you want to keep following me to discuss my sense of humor... or the lack thereof?”

Realizing her mistake, Jenna smacked her forehead, which had been clouded by gossip. “Holy cow, how did I end up following you to the bus? My dad's waiting for me at the school gates.”

After casting a look of mock resentment at Mirabella, she turned and sprinted back the way she came. A soft chuckle escaped Mirabella.

Summer got into Emmitt's car and after a brief chat, she mentioned. "Emmitt, I've signed up for BrainSpark Nationals. The Education Association is really focusing on it this year. If I can make it into the top three nationwide, I'll get a direct admission offer from Prestige College."

Emmitt, surprised, turned to her. "Sounds like an interesting competition. Do your best and aim for a top spot."

Summer's gaze lowered as she fiddled with the fluffy keychain on her bag, murmuring an agreement before adding, "I saw that Mira signed up too."

Emmitt's grip on the steering wheel tightened briefly as he frowned. "With her grades, why bother with this competition? Isn't that just a waste of time?"

"She might just want a challenge. It's all good. Just think of it as an extracurricular activity, broadening her horizons." Summer said with a soft laugh.

Emmitt, slightly exasperated, just shook his head. It seemed his little sister really wasn't the type to make things easy for anyone. After dinner with Summer, Emmitt dropped her back to the Gilbert family home. It was still early when he left, so he decided to drive back to the Davis household.

Delilah, with a face mask on, was surprised to see her eldest son at the door. "Emmitt, what brings you home so late? Everything okay?"

Stepping inside, Emmitt glanced around before saying, "I've just finished up with some stuff and thought I'd stay at

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home for a few days."

He paused before asking, "Where's Mirabella?"

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Delilah eyed her eldest son with a curious blend of suspicion and warning in her voice. “You are just back home and already looking for your sister. What kind of mischief are you plotting now?”

Ever since their last falling—out, this brat had done nothing but phone her to keep an eye on her daughter. She hadn’t seen him this eager to return in ages.

Emmitt’s lips twitched into a half-smile. “Are you under some kind of misunderstanding? I was just casually asking about my little

sis.

Delilah peeled off her facial mask, revealing a damp face tinged with distaste. “Misunderstanding? Don’t you know in your own heart?”

Emmitt was speechless. “Enough, I’m done talking. I need to pamper my skin. Do whatever you please.”

After saying that, Delilah turned and headed for the bedroom. After only a couple of steps, she paused, turned back with a stern expression, and added. “And don’t you dare disturb your sister. She’s been working her tail off studying every day.”

After leaving those words hanging in the air, she disappeared into her room, so suddenly, only Emmitt and Shawn, who was engrossed in the TV, remained in the living room.

Emmitt glanced at Shawn, about to speak when Shawn stood up, switched off the TV with the remote, and yawned loudly. His words showed his fatigue, “Woke up way too early this morning. I’m beat. You should hit the hay early, too, Emmitt. Goodnight.”

Without waiting for a response. Shawn quickly retreated to his room as well. Emmitt was stunned. Had he really become not welcomed for his parents after just a few days away?

Climbing the stairs with a sigh, he glanced at Mirabella’s room and lingered for a few seconds before pulling back and heading into his own.

The next day was Saturday, and with no classes, but Mirabella kept up her routine of an early morning jog.

After her run, as she ascended the stairs and passed by Emmitt's door, it swung open. She hesitated for a split second. Emmitt, clad in pajamas, looked like he had just woken up. His eyes were still half-closed. He opened the door to find a sweaty Mirabella, which snapped him to alertness. "You're...?"

Mirabella's initial surprise faded, and her voice was calm as she volunteered, "Just got back from my morning run."

At her words, Emmitt paused, seemingly taken aback since most people would choose to sleep in on weekends.

"I'm heading to my room," said Mirabella, nodding politely to Emmitt in a manner that was both courteous and well-mannered. Emmitt watched her retreating figure, momentarily lost in thought.

Twenty minutes later, Mirabella sat quietly and obediently at the breakfast table, eating at a leisurely pace. Emmitt sat across from her. His gaze drifted to her now and then. He wanted to speak but unsure what to say, and his expression was awkward.

Feeling the weight of his stare, Mirabella set down her spoon and lifted her head. Her clear, inquisitive eyes fixed on him. "Do you have something you want to say?"

Emmitt cleared his throat and, recalling the previous night's conversation with Summer, broached, "I heard you signed up for the BrainSpark Nationals?"

"How did you know?" Mirabella asked, with a hint of surprise in her voice.

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"Summer mentioned it yesterday." Emmitt didn't see any reason to hide it and spoke frankly.

Mirabella raised an eyebrow and let out an "oh." Well, she had more or less guessed as much,

"Why do you want to join that competition?" Emmitt was about to chide her for wasting time in her critical last year but held back.

Mirabella's lips curved into a faint smile as she simply retorted, "Did you ask Summer that? What did she tell you?"