

TV Show 281

Chapter 282: Stop Messing Around

"Stop joking. What could possibly be wrong with me?"

Adam's heart tightened, but he remained calm on the surface.

At this moment, when Phoebe asked that question, his first reaction was that someone had seen him meeting with Nora.

That would be the worst-case scenario.

Although he hadn't done anything with Nora—after all, what could he possibly do in just thirty minutes? He was sure everyone knew that.

But Adam was a handsome young man, secretly meeting with a charming and mature woman. No matter how you looked at it, it was bound to spark imaginations.

Plus, they were both writers. Nora was even known as the "Queen of Erotica" and had written multiple novels featuring similar scenarios...

As Nora's loyal readers, Rachel and the others would likely jump to conclusions immediately: Was the "Queen of Erotica" trying to act out one of her book's scenes? Or was she gathering material for a new novel?

A writer's field research—how could that be considered indecent?

It was artistic!

But Adam didn't really believe that was the case.

His sharp senses and keen intuition allowed him to detect if someone was nearby, and he was especially sensitive to being watched.

That was exactly why he had cut Nora off earlier when she tried to speak outside the restroom.

Given how cautious he was—and the fact that all their friends were busy having fun in the banquet hall—the chances of someone seeing him were incredibly low.

And when Phoebe said those words, Adam immediately glanced at Chandler out of the corner of his eye. Seeing that Chandler didn't show any signs of anger or confusion, he relaxed.

"You're still denying it?"

Phoebe put on a dramatic expression. "Rachel is pregnant! It's definitely yours, right?"

"...?"

Adam's mouth twitched.

"Phoebe!"

Rachel protested, clearly annoyed.

"What?"

Phoebe said matter-of-factly, "You won't say who the father is, so we can only guess. And who else is more suspicious than Adam?"

"Why am I the prime suspect?"

Adam retorted.

"Because you're the most handsome and the most charming!"

Phoebe grinned.

"Thanks for the compliment."

Adam shook his head, half amused, half exasperated. "But you forgot one more 'most.'"

"What 'most'?"

Phoebe asked curiously.

"The most loyal and principled!"

Adam said seriously. "When it comes to relationships, have you ever seen anyone more loyal and principled than me?"

"Pfft!"

Phoebe and Monica almost spit out their drinks. Even Rachel, who had been in a bad mood, couldn't help but laugh.

"What's so funny?"

Adam remained dead serious. "My principle in relationships has always been: more than friends, less than lovers. Friends don't cross the line. That's never changed. Go ahead—name one instance where I broke this rule."

Everyone was speechless.

"Exactly."

Adam smirked. "Just because I have many female friends, you assume I'm a playboy with no principles. But in reality, no one is more principled than me!"

Rachel and the others froze. Meeting Adam's "sincere" gaze, they awkwardly averted their eyes.

Chandler was a prime example—without Adam's help, he would've definitely made a move on Joey's girlfriend.

Monica, too. Though she and Chandler were now happily together, it didn't erase the fact that she had secretly turned to him for "mutual support" in the past.

And Rachel? She had thrown every tactic in the book at Adam back when she was interested in him—basic moves, advanced moves, ultimate moves, and even final moves—all to get him into an unspeakable situation.

Even Phoebe wasn't innocent.

When Monica had broken up with her boyfriend, it hadn't even been a few hours before Phoebe was already cozying up to him. That raised a lot of questions...

"Looks like everyone agrees."

Adam smiled in satisfaction.

Compared to Rachel and the others, he felt a strong sense of moral superiority.

The only minor flaw in his record was his past relationship with Nora.

But that had been before he even knew Chandler, and at the time, he genuinely hadn't recognized Nora as Chandler's mother. Since then, nothing had ever happened between them again—not even earlier, when they had only reminisced and mostly talked about Chandler.

As for keeping secrets from William and Steven while being involved with Alice?

Well, he wasn't even friends with William and Steven. Did he really need to be polite about it?

"If it's not yours, then whose is it?"

Phoebe changed the subject.

Rachel shook her head. "Stop asking. I'm not telling anyone until I tell him first..."

Before she could finish, she was cut off.

"Hah."

Adam chuckled. "Do we even need to ask? It's obviously Ross's!"

"How do you know?"

Rachel blurted out.

Earlier, when Phoebe and the others had guessed Ross, she had managed to steer the conversation away. But this time, Adam's tone was so certain that she accidentally gave herself away.

"So it is Ross's!"

Phoebe clapped her hands, laughing.

Monica gasped, covering her mouth.

"Come on!"

Adam shrugged. "You two have been on and off for how many years now? Seven or eight? And now you're acting all secretive about it. If it wasn't Ross's, that'd be a bigger surprise.

"You probably had another one of those 'old friend' moments and got swept up in the heat of the moment. A little 'mutual assistance'—don't act like it's a big deal!"

Once two people had already crossed that line before, the chances of them doing it again were astronomically high.

Especially with Rachel and Ross, who had been entangled for so long and were still constantly around each other. It was practically inevitable.

That was exactly why Ross's British ex-wife had demanded that he cut off contact with Rachel after learning about their history.

Even Westerners knew the risks!

The whole "we're just friends now, absolutely nothing else" excuse? Total nonsense.

Or, as Leslie Winkle from The Big Bang Theory would put it:

"We've seen each other's sex faces."

That's not the same as being regular friends.

"Fine."

Rachel sighed as everyone stared at her. "It really is Ross's. But before I tell him myself, you all need to keep quiet about it."

"Of course."

Everyone nodded.

"Especially you, Phoebe!"

Rachel fixed her with a sharp glare.

"What did I do?"

Phoebe feigned innocence.

"Hmph!"

Rachel snorted. "If it weren't for you running your mouth just now, this whole thing wouldn't have come out!"

"That's not my fault."

Phoebe pouted. "What was I supposed to do—just let you drink champagne while you're pregnant?"

"Alright, enough of that."

Monica interrupted. "Rachel, what do you plan to do?"

"I don't know."

Rachel looked conflicted and uncertain.

"Isn't it obvious?"

Adam scoffed. "Tell Ross, get married, have the baby. You're both getting older—stop messing around!"

"Yeah."

Monica, happily married herself, was the first to agree. "Ross had a crush on you for ten years, and then you two have been going back and forth for another seven or eight. Now you're having his baby—clearly, you love each other. Marriage is the best choice."

"I don't know."

Rachel shook her head absentmindedly.

Seeing this, Adam didn't bother saying more.

Rachel and Ross weren't like Chandler and Monica. They loved unnecessary drama.

He'd already done his part as a friend—he wasn't about to waste any more energy on it.

Now that Chandler's bachelor party and wedding were over, his focus was shifting to graduation and his residency training.

But before that, he had a certain score to settle...

Chapter 283: Adam's Revenge

New York.

McCallan Bar.

Adam and Matthew were drinking and chatting.

"Well, well, isn't this the best man himself, Adam Duncan?"

Barney, dressed in a suit, walked in, his eyes lighting up when he saw Adam. He greeted him in an exaggerated tone.

"Well, well, isn't this the man with no principles, Barney Stinson?"

Adam shot back in an even more exaggerated tone.

"We're all friends here."

As always, Ted tried to mediate.

"But some people don't treat me as a friend."

Adam cut in, "Even after I warned him repeatedly, he still tried to ruin my best friend's bachelor party. Do you think a simple 'we're all friends' can just erase that?"

"Barney, that was too much!"

Lily immediately got angry upon hearing this.

"Come on."

Barney waved it off. "I just wanted to give him an unforgettable bachelor night."

"This is my friend's bachelor night—why do you get to decide what it should be like?"

Adam sneered. "Oh, right, you're the kind of person who thinks, 'I don't care what you want; it's all about what I want.' Selfish, self-centered, completely egotistical."

"Barney, you really went too far this time. Apologize to Adam."

Matthew tried to mediate.

"Adam, aren't you overreacting a bit?"

Ted spoke up on Barney's behalf.

"Overreacting?"

Adam scoffed. "Oh, you think this is overreacting? Ted, Ted, Ted... this is just the beginning. Before, I kept reminding him over and over, but for someone as egotistical as Barney, words don't work. So do you think I'm just going to keep talking?"

"What are you going to do?"

Barney smirked.

His pride, insecurities, and self-respect had long been shattered by his first love. The person he had become was modeled after the very kind of elite scumbag who had destroyed his pure-hearted love.

Playing games with life was his attitude—he didn't care if others wanted to play, didn't care if they got hurt, and didn't even care if he himself got hurt.

When someone reaches a certain level of shamelessness, they become untouchable.

At this moment, Barney Stinson was indeed in that untouchable zone.

Though Matthew and the others were his chosen friends, they had only known each other for less than a year. Their bond wasn't strong enough to make him change his lifestyle.

In fact, even nine years later, he still wouldn't change for them.

The only one who could change him was that woman...

"I heard you love a good challenge."

Adam noticed Barney's indifference, but he was prepared for this. Without hesitation, he threw out his proposal: "And you never back down from one?"

"That's right."

Barney's eyes lit up. He adjusted his tie and said confidently, "Barney Stinson never turns down a challenge."

"Then I'm challenging you."

Adam grinned. "Do you have the guts to accept?"

"Bring it on!"

Barney declared with confidence.

"Great."

Adam said, "The challenge is in your area of expertise—picking up women. For the next month, each night, you'll randomly pick one woman, and we'll both approach her. Whoever succeeds the most times wins."

"Interesting!"

Barney's eyes sparkled. He looked at Adam with newfound appreciation. "I knew it, Adam—you and I are the same kind of person!"

"What's the wager?"

Ted asked.

"The loser has to make a crown for the winner and publicly say, 'I was wrong, I admit defeat,' a hundred times."

Adam grinned. "Both a material and a mental wager. How about it?"

"I accept the challenge!"

Barney agreed without hesitation.

He loved challenges.

"This is a fun bet."

Lily chimed in. "But I want to add one condition."

"What is it?"

Barney asked.

"Since we have material and mental stakes, I want this bet to also settle past grievances. After this, we put all previous issues behind us."

Lily smiled. "After all, we're all good friends, right?"

"No problem."

Adam smiled.

His feelings toward Barney were complicated.

Deep down, he didn't actually dislike Barney. In fact, he rather liked him.

But Barney's reckless behavior at Chandler's bachelor party had really pissed him off. He needed to teach him a lesson to get over it.

And once that lesson was delivered, Adam believed Barney would learn to rein himself in a bit.

"I'm fine with that too."

Barney also recognized Lily's good intentions.

"One more rule."

Adam added, "Each night, we can only pick one woman. If the loser fails, they cannot approach anyone else—not even strippers. Breaking this rule means automatic forfeiture."

"Heh."

Barney couldn't help but chuckle. "You're really confident, huh?"

He was an experienced player, and he saw right through Adam's hidden agenda.

Adam clearly believed he would dominate Barney in this contest—so much so that he was setting a secondary punishment: forcing Barney to go without women for an entire month.

For guys like Barney and Ji Xiaolan, going without certain activities for a single week, let alone a month, was torture.

This punishment was worse than saying "I admit defeat" a hundred times in public.

Because it wasn't just physical suffering—it was a brutal mental blow. It was a direct taunt: You think you're the best at this, but you're actually not.

As for crafting a crown? That was just money, a trivial thing for both Adam and Barney.

"Do you dare to bet?"

Adam raised an eyebrow. "Or are you going to back out, like last time, when you agreed but then secretly cheated?"

"..."

Barney froze. Adam's blunt taunt suddenly made him regret his past dishonesty.

Adam had just proven himself to be someone worth playing with—someone he respected.

At least, compared to Ted. Ted only passively accepted Barney's challenges. He never initiated anything this fun himself.

It would be a shame if Adam kept looking down on him because of his past actions.

"Of course, I dare to bet!"

Barney said seriously. "And I won't cheat this time. Lily and the others can be witnesses—I stake my honor on it!"

"Good."

Adam smiled. "Then the bet is official! Tomorrow night is game on."

"Fantastic."

Barney was thrilled, rubbing his hands together. "I have a feeling this is going to be *legen—wait for it—dary! Legendary!*"

"I believe it."

Adam smirked. "But whether you'll be the legend... or the loser, we'll see."

"This is getting exciting."

Lily's eyes glowed with anticipation.

"Yeah, I'm hyped."

Matthew was getting into it.

"Heh."

Ted, on the other hand, had a forced smile.

He had always disapproved of Barney's games. He only ever participated reluctantly.

But now, watching Barney and Adam get along so well, he suddenly felt a little left out.

Chapter 284 The Supreme Lord of Kidney Treasures

The following evening.

McLaren Bar.

"Wow!"

As soon as Adam walked in, Lily and the others let out gasps of surprise.

"Barney is doomed," Lily muttered to herself, her eyes lighting up mischievously.

Adam's natural charm was undeniable, and now, after a professional stylist had worked their magic, his outfit and overall look were top-tier. This wasn't just a simple 1+1 situation—his transformation was exponentially greater.

The effect was immediate and obvious. The dazzlingly refined Adam didn't just make Lily's eyes sparkle; every woman in the bar took notice, their gazes gleaming with interest. And it wasn't just the women...

"Barney's not here yet?" Adam asked with a smile as he took a seat.

"If I were him, I wouldn't even bother showing up. Might as well admit defeat," Ted said, his voice dripping with jealousy. "By the way, isn't this kind of cheating?"

Despite his outwardly honest and kind demeanor, Ted had, over the years, lived up to his name. His personality was strikingly similar to his brother, Teddy. (Adam's younger sister had named him early on. If she had known how that name would later be ruined, she probably would have insisted on changing it, just like Adam did.) Seeing Adam looking this good naturally triggered an instinctual sense of rejection.

"How is this cheating?" Adam shot him a look.

"You're just too rich! That entire outfit—this whole look—it's clearly something money can buy," Ted said with an awkward laugh.

"And where do you think that money came from? Didn't I earn it myself?" Adam smirked. "If I recall correctly, Barney's favorite phrase is 'Suit up!' Do you think any of his suits are cheap? A full outfit of his costs at least ten grand. Why doesn't he try picking up women in bargain-bin clothes?"

Adam recalled how, when Marshall needed new pants for his internship but could only afford to cover a hole with ink, Barney had dragged him to his tailor. Even with a supposed '30% discount,' the custom suit still cost \$4,000.

Even if Barney had lied about the discount, the original price had to be over \$4,000.

And that was just the suit. The shoes, the tie—none of it came cheap. Not to mention the watch on his wrist, the ultimate symbol of a man's status.

A full look worth \$10,000 was a conservative estimate.

Without that kind of investment, Barney's exaggerated antics would come off as nothing more than creepy and sleazy.

With it? He was charming and debonair.

That's just how reality works.

"Exactly! The money you earn is part of your personal charm," Lily agreed. "As long as you're not directly paying for affection, it's totally fair."

Then she turned to Ted. "And let's not forget how many times Barney has literally paid for attention. Have you forgotten his 'charity work' for financially struggling college girls?"

"...I was just making an observation," Ted muttered awkwardly.

"For the next month, you all need to keep an eye on him," Adam said, smoothly changing the topic rather than continuing to argue with Ted.

Ted might be worse than a playboy in the eyes of a good woman, but as a friend, he was loyal and reliable.

Otherwise, given all the awful things he had done to good women, Lily wouldn't just be lightly punching him—she'd have cut him off completely.

Adam had every right to look down on Ted, but he wasn't a perfect person himself. He wasn't naive enough to expect his friends to be perfect either.

Because nobody is perfect.

"Don't worry, we'll keep a close watch on him," Lily immediately agreed.

Marshall also nodded with a smile.

Ted forced a reluctant grin.

"Nicely done, Adam! You actually suited up!"

Barney walked in and instantly lit up with excitement. "Ted, you see this? This is how you dress for picking up women. Sorry, but for the next month, you're relieved of your wingman duties. Feel free to do your own thing."

"I never wanted to be your wingman in the first place," Ted grumbled, clearly frustrated.

"Let's get started. Pick a woman," Adam said with a smile. "I'll let you go first. If you succeed, go freshen up in the bathroom, and I'll go after you. But if you fail, it's my turn."

"What if neither of you succeeds?" Marshall asked, curious.

"Come on~"

Barney smoothed his hand over his suit jacket, as if to say, A man who looks like this could never fail.

"I'm giving you the first move," Adam reminded him.

"See that redhead at the bar? She's my target," Barney said confidently.

"You sure?" Adam glanced at her. She was attractive, with a good figure—a solid pick.

He was playing it safe, making sure there was no room for manipulation. If Barney got desperate, he might deliberately choose someone completely unattractive just to make it impossible for Adam to follow through.

And Adam?

He had his standards.

As for Barney?

If it meant winning, there was nothing he wouldn't do.

In the future, Barney would challenge himself to seduce Marshall's law professor—nicknamed 'The Cougar'—just to help Marshall pass his finals. He would push himself to the absolute limit, ending up in the hospital, but still refuse to admit defeat, all for the sake of securing an 'A' from her.

If Barney refused to tone it down after this bet, Adam was prepared to send a few more 'Cougars' his way until he truly understood the difference between obsession and wisdom—between recklessness and enlightenment.

And who truly deserved the title of The Supreme Lord of Kidney Treasures.

"Of course."

Barney adjusted his tie. "Think of this as a senior giving guidance to a junior."

"Just don't regret it," Adam cut him off, then immediately stood up and walked toward the bar.

"The game is on..." Barney murmured excitedly.

But before he even had a chance to observe and analyze the situation, Adam had already turned back, flashing a successful gesture. He was heading to the bathroom, while the redhead picked up her purse, looking ready to leave.

"That's it? He already won?"

Barney was momentarily stunned.

"That's the power of Adam," Lily whispered in awe.

"Barney, hurry up," Ted urged. "Otherwise, you'll lose the first night's round."

"You're right."

Barney snapped back to reality, straightened himself up, grabbed his drink, and confidently walked toward the redhead. Flashing his most dazzling smile, he introduced himself, "Hey, I'm Barney."

"Get lost," she snapped, rolling her eyes. "My boyfriend is coming out any second now."

"..."

Barney's smile froze.

Adam had just met her a few seconds ago—how was he already her 'boyfriend'?!

"Well played, Adam Duncan. Round one goes to you," Barney admitted.

Seeing the sheer disdain on the redhead's face and her utter lack of interest, Barney had no choice but to return to the table. He took a sip of his drink, shrugged at Lily and the others, and—far from looking discouraged—his eyes gleamed with excitement.

To him, this game had just gotten even more interesting.

When Adam emerged from the bathroom, the redhead was still waiting for him. He flashed a confident smile, unsurprised, and walked out of the bar with her.

Before leaving, he turned back to Barney and the group and made Barney's signature two-finger-to-the-eyes gesture, signaling that Barney was officially benched for the night—self-supervision was now in effect, with Lily and the others watching him like hawks.

Chapter 285: Barney's Agony

"Get lost!"

"Get lost!"

"Get lost!"

"..."

"Woo~"

For several nights in a row, Barney suffered one blow after another, to the point where he almost broke down completely.

That night.

"Barney, you can't keep letting Adam go first. Otherwise, you really won't stand a chance at all."

Ted reminded him, "In things like this, there's always an order—first come, first served. Whoever goes first has the advantage. Since this is a fair competition, you should take turns. If you always let Adam go first, it looks like you're underestimating him. That's not good."

"You're right."

With that opening, Barney immediately took the chance to agree. "This time, I'll go first."

Lily and Marshall sat nearby, smiling without saying a word.

When Adam arrived and heard Barney's declaration, he smiled and said, "Of course, no problem."

"Great! This time, I'll show off my real skills."

Barney stood up, straightened his tie, and looked confident.

"Have you met Barney?"

Barney approached a blonde beauty, lightly tapped her on the shoulder, and used one of his signature pick-up lines.

In the past, he would team up with Ted or other wingmen to introduce each other, tapping a woman and walking away, leaving her for his friend.

But now, since he was competing fairly with Adam, he had to rely on himself.

The blonde woman turned around, looking a bit confused when she saw only Barney standing there.

"Barney Stinson."

Barney extended his hand with a charming smile.

"Amy."

The blonde responded after a brief hesitation. Seeing Barney's sharp (expensive) suit and confident (borderline arrogant) demeanor, she accepted his unconventional greeting and shook his hand with a smile.

In America, the names Amy, Emily, and Emma are as common as "Xiaoming" and "Xiaohong" in China—just look at how many Amys Adam has encountered.

"So, Amy, do you like magic?"

Barney pulled out one of his best tricks.

"It's okay, I guess."

Amy shrugged.

As soon as she finished speaking, a spark of fire shot from Barney's right hand to his left. When he opened his left palm, the words "It's okay, I guess." were written there.

"Oh my God!"

Amy gasped in surprise.

Another spark flew to his right hand. When he opened it, the words "Oh my God!" were written there.

From that moment on, Amy was hooked, pestering Barney about his magic tricks and laughing at his jokes.

"Looks like Barney won this round."

Ted smiled with satisfaction.

"Heh."

Adam smirked. "It's not over yet."

After a while, Barney subtly flashed a victory sign at his friends before heading toward the restroom.

"My turn."

Adam took a sip of his beer and walked toward the blonde, Amy.

"Hi."

"Hi~"

Barney had barely turned the corner before stopping—he never actually went to the restroom.

He agreed with Ted—when two top-tier players face off, going first really does matter.

In his mind, Adam had already earned his respect as a worthy opponent.

Barney's first move had been executed perfectly. Now, he was eager to see Adam in action.

Then, his face darkened.

All it took was a single "Hi" from Adam, and Amy was completely smitten. Her infatuated gaze made it painfully clear—Adam's casual greeting was far more effective than all of Barney's carefully practiced magic tricks.

Watching as Amy eagerly followed Adam, Barney couldn't take it anymore. He hurried back and called out to her.

"Amy!"

He was determined to face Adam head-on and let Amy make a choice.

Though he didn't want to admit it, for the first time, he appreciated the moral argument about fairness—he was first, after all.

"Barney, I've got something to do. Let's chat next time."

Amy barely glanced at him before slipping her arm around Adam's and walking out.

As if she hadn't just been laughing at Barney's jokes minutes ago.

Adam flashed Barney a smile and walked away with her.

"No!"

Watching them leave, Barney shouted in frustration.

He was first!

Barney's Nightmare

From that moment on, Barney's life became a nightmare.

No matter how much effort he put into his strategies and routines, none of it could compete with Adam's simple "Hi."

Being repeatedly crushed in his proudest field, combined with his growing frustration (hormonal buildup), was pushing Barney to the edge.

"No!"

"No!"

"No!"

Those were the words he shouted most often.

"Adam, maybe you should let him win once," Lily said sympathetically.

"Yeah," Ted agreed. "Letting him win just once wouldn't hurt, right?"

"No way."

Adam shook his head. "This is a bet. A fair competition. Throwing the match would be the greatest insult to him."

"But you've already won."

Ted frowned. "Would it really hurt to let him win once and give him a break?"

"This is part of his punishment."

Adam smirked. "He knew the stakes when he made the bet. After this, he'll finally start considering other people's perspectives instead of always doing whatever he wants. But before that, he needs a lesson he won't forget."

Then, Adam told them a modified version of Lu Xiaobu and Zhang Wei's story.

"Ted, do you think Barney would do something like that?" Adam asked.

"..."

Ted had no answer.

Of course, Barney would do something like that.

In fact, his version would be even worse.

"And would you want to be Zhang Wei?"

Adam continued.

Ted's mouth twitched. He didn't answer.

Of course not. If he ever got married and Barney ruined it, he'd probably go insane.

Exactly.

Adam had deliberately altered the story. In this version, Zhang Wei lost his true love because he missed the wedding.

If Adam had told the real version, Ted would have probably said, "If I were Zhang Wei, I'd just give them my blessing."

After shutting Ted down and calming Lily—who, after hearing the story, was demanding that Adam keep punishing Barney—Adam resumed the game.

One Month Later

For Adam, a month passed quickly.

For Barney, who had been crushed repeatedly, it felt like an eternity of suffering.

"I lost."

At last, Barney admitted defeat, looking both shattered and relieved.

"I was wrong. I give up!"

In front of the entire bar, Barney repeated this 100 times.

"I'll get you the crown soon."

With that, Barney quickly walked out of MacLaren's Pub.

"Barney..."

Lily, Ted, and Marshall felt a little sorry for him.

"Should we go comfort him?"

"We probably shouldn't. He needs time to lick his wounds."

Marshall reasoned.

"Heh."

Adam couldn't help but laugh.

"You're laughing?"

Ted was furious. "That's cruel!"

"Why wouldn't I laugh?"

Adam scoffed. "This is Barney Stinson we're talking about. You seriously think he's sitting alone, wallowing in self-pity? No way."

"Wait... you mean..."

Lily, Ted, and Marshall suddenly realized.

Strip Club

Barney sat with a wide grin, enjoying a lap dance.

"Ah... oh..."

"Already?"

"NOOOO!!!"

As the dancer looked at him in surprise, Barney's agonized scream echoed through the universe, seemingly shattering the fourth wall itself.

Chapter 286: The Duncan Legion

After teaching Barney a lesson, the time had already reached the eve of graduation.

"Chandler, let's go."

Adam pushed open the door to Apartment 520 and called out to Chandler.

"Alright."

Chandler leaped up in response.

"Where are you guys going?"

Ross asked curiously.

"Adam is graduating from medical school tomorrow, and his family is coming to attend his graduation ceremony. We're heading out to pick them up now," Monica explained.

"Doesn't Adam have a car?"

Ross asked, surprised.

"Do you think one car is enough to fit so many people?"

Joey, who had seven sisters, immediately understood the situation.

"How many siblings do you have, Adam?"

Ross chuckled.

"I have no idea."

Adam replied with a darkened expression, "We'll talk about it when I get back. Chandler, let's go!"

Without waiting for Ross to ask more questions, he dragged Chandler out the door.

His reaction had everything to do with a certain "little bird" who had told him over the phone last night that his mother might be having another baby—again.

New York Airport

"Adam!"

As soon as the direct flight from Texas landed, a petite figure dashed toward Adam.

"Charlie."

Seeing his fourth sister, Adam's previously gloomy face finally brightened. Smiling broadly, he opened his arms to welcome her.

The 11-year-old Charlie giggled as she threw herself into Adam's embrace, planting a big kiss on his cheek.

Chandler and Matthew, standing nearby, watched with envy.

Chandler envied Adam for having such an adorable daughter-like sibling.

Matthew, on the other hand, longed for a little sister like that himself.

The Erickson family was full of towering, rugged men who played their own brutal version of "ice basketball"—a chaotic fusion of hockey and basketball with no real rules, just a bunch of giants roaring and roughhousing. He had never seen such a cute little sister before.

That's right—Matthew had come along, too, since he also had a car.

Adam had booked the plane tickets for his parents and siblings, so he knew that his and Chandler's two cars wouldn't be enough to transport everyone.

"Adam!"

At that moment, his mother and the rest of the family arrived.

"Mom."

Adam's face darkened again.

"Heh heh."

Teddy and Gabe, his second sister and third brother, snickered at his reaction.

His mother looked a bit embarrassed, while his father, standing at the back, simply smiled awkwardly.

"Chandler, Matthew, let me introduce you."

Adam wisely changed the subject, introducing his friends to his family. "This is my mom, Amy. Mom, these are my good friends, Chandler and Matthew."

"Hi, Mrs. Duncan."

"Hi, nice to meet you."

His mother greeted them warmly.

"That's my dad, Bob."

Adam continued, pointing out his family members one by one. "This is my second sister, Teddy; my third brother, Gabe; my fourth sister, Charlie; and my fifth brother, Toby."

"Hey there."

Chandler and Matthew greeted them one by one.

"Teddy, Gabe, introduce your plus-ones yourselves."

Adam turned to the unfamiliar faces standing next to his siblings.

"This is my boyfriend, Spencer," Teddy said, pulling her high school sweetheart closer.

"This is my girlfriend, Danielle."

Gabe spoke proudly.

Adam glanced at Danielle and frowned slightly. She had a decent figure and appearance, but there was something about her aura that he didn't like—her eyes were too flirtatious, the kind that seemed to send signals to everyone around her.

However, he didn't say anything. Gabe was already in his twenties and hadn't turned out badly—he was still as sharp and quick-witted as he had been as a kid. As long as he didn't go astray, Adam didn't feel the need to interfere too much.

"Alright, let's get to the hotel and settle in first."

Adam took charge. "Teddy, you and Spencer ride with Chandler. Gabe, you and Danielle ride with Matthew. Mom, Dad, you take Charlie and Toby and ride with me."

"I want to ride in the Porsche."

Gabe immediately spoke up when he saw Chandler's car.

"If you don't want to ride with Matthew, you can take a cab or the bus."

Adam wasn't about to indulge him.

"Listen to your big brother," their mother scolded Gabe.

"Okay, okay."

Gabe raised his hands in surrender, muttering, "Pregnant mom is terrifying."

With that, the three cars formed a convoy and headed toward the Four Seasons Hotel.

On the Road

Unlike in Eastern countries, in the U.S., when family or relatives visit, they usually don't stay at the house unless specifically invited or if only a couple of people are visiting. Instead, they book hotels.

For example, whenever Nora visited New York, she never stayed at Chandler's place—she always booked a hotel.

This way, personal living habits remained undisturbed. Everyone had different routines, and suddenly cramming together could be inconvenient. Staying at a hotel was simply more comfortable and practical.

In Adam's past life, this had also become a growing trend in major cities back in the East.

As living standards improved, people no longer felt the need to "make do" with uncomfortable arrangements.

They could afford better options now.

Inside the Car

Adam focused on driving.

His father, Bob, sat in the passenger seat.

His mother, Amy, sat in the back with Charlie and Toby.

"Adam..."

His father sneaked a glance at Adam's still-darkened face, looking a little awkward.

"Hmph."

Adam simply grunted.

"Well... we didn't plan this. It was an accident..."

His father tried to explain.

"This isn't the first time."

Adam said irritably. "The first time was an accident, and the second time was also an accident? Mom is almost fifty! Do you know how dangerous this is for her health?"

"I know."

His mother spoke up directly. "It really was an accident, and you can't blame your father. No matter how high the risk, I'm having this baby. Another sibling means another family member, and I'm not afraid of the risk."

"One basketball team isn't enough for you?"

Adam scoffed. "Now you want a volleyball team? Or why not go all the way and form a soccer team? Just because you're not afraid doesn't mean the risks aren't real. If something happens to you, what about Charlie, Toby, and the still-unnamed sixth one?"

His mother instinctively hugged six-year-old Toby tighter, unable to argue back.

In big families, the mother was often the glue that held everyone together.

With his mother's energy and warmth, their family remained close, happy, and full of love.

But if anything happened to her, their tight-knit family might fall apart.

Adam had seen this firsthand in both his past life and this one.

That's why he so desperately wanted his mother to live a long, healthy life.

His frustration wasn't just about the pregnancy—it was because his parents were being reckless.

Of course, Adam also knew it was because his parents were still deeply in love.

Otherwise, at nearly fifty, how would they even end up in this situation?

After all, while no birth control method was 100% foolproof, the odds of such an "accident" happening at their age were incredibly slim—practically impossible unless their... frequency... was exceptionally high.

And that only happened when a couple was still passionately in love.

Chapter 287: Dr. Duncan

"After the graduation ceremony tomorrow, I'll take you to the medical center for a full check-up the day after."

Seeing that his mom seemed a little down, Adam could only suppress his worries and said helplessly, "We'll all get a full check-up while we're at it."

"Mm-hmm, mm-hmm," his mom and dad nodded quickly.

"Mm-hmm, mm-hmm," his little sister Charlie mimicked them playfully, looking absolutely adorable.

"Mm-hmm, mm-hmm," his youngest brother Toby, not understanding what was going on, nodded along just like his sister.

Adam couldn't help but laugh at the scene through the rearview mirror.

Charlie giggled along with him.

Toby, always following his sister's lead, laughed as well—though, since birth, he'd been brushed off by his older sister more times than he could count.

"Mom, what does Gabby's girlfriend do?" Adam asked casually.

"I don't know, maybe she's a classmate of his?" his mom replied hesitantly.

"A classmate?" Adam frowned.

His younger brother Gabby wasn't much of a bookworm; his true passion was gaming. Despite being smart, his grades were terrible. But with Adam's help, getting into a good university had been easy.

When their parents asked Adam for advice, he suggested Gabby pursue an arts major to eventually work in game design.

First, an arts degree was easy—subjective enough that almost anyone could pass since everyone has their own "Hamlet." Unlike science majors, where you either knew the material or you didn't, art was much more flexible.

Second, it was a good fit. Gabby loved gaming, and the industry was booming with plenty of money to be made.

In the end, Adam pulled some strings to get Gabby into the ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena, California.

California, alongside New York, was one of America's cultural hubs, home to both Hollywood and Silicon Valley. Gabby loved the decision—he didn't even want to come home for Christmas his first year.

That only happened once, though, as Adam quickly set him straight.

"If you don't even want to spend time with your family during the holidays, then you probably don't need any financial help from us, either. Since Americans love their independence, you can be truly independent."

Gabby got the message fast.

According to him, nothing mattered more than family.

"I know! I know!" Charlie said with a sly grin. "Adam, do you want to know?"

"Would you be willing to tell me for free?" Adam teased.

"I'll tell you," Charlie giggled mischievously.

"But not for free, right?" Adam chuckled knowingly.

"Hehe," Charlie didn't answer, but her silence was as good as confirmation.

"Too bad. I had a gift ready for someone, but I guess they don't want it anymore." Adam continued to tease.

"Gabby's girlfriend is an actress!" Charlie blurted. "I think she's been in some movies."

"An actress? In movies?"

Adam felt a sudden sense of dread.

Gabby might be an art student in the heart of Hollywood, so dating a beautiful actress chasing her dreams wouldn't be too surprising.

But Gabby was also just a broke student. Sure, he was somewhat good-looking, but nowhere near attractive enough to date an actress who'd actually been in films.

The entertainment industry was brutally realistic. Most aspiring actresses dream of fame, wealth, and success.

An actress who'd already landed roles wouldn't typically date a broke college kid—unless it was true love, which seemed highly unlikely.

"Charlie, how do you know she's an actress who's been in movies?" Adam asked.

"I overheard it by accident," Charlie said with a grin.

Adam understood immediately. Charlie was a little troublemaker at her most energetic age, and eavesdropping was typical for her.

The fact she overheard it accidentally made the information seem reliable.

"Charlie, are you enjoying school?" Adam smoothly changed the subject, already planning to investigate this 'Danielle' quietly.

"Yeah!" Charlie's eyes lit up.

"She's such a troublemaker," their mom chimed in, already launching into a lecture about how often they'd been called to the school over Charlie's antics.

Four Seasons Hotel

Adam had booked a presidential suite for their parents.

"Your brother's loaded," Danielle commented, admiring the lavish room.

"Too bad it's not my money," Gabby said lazily as he flopped onto the bed. "Adam is such a cheapskate."

"Cheapskate? Really?" Danielle raised an eyebrow. "That car of yours wasn't cheap."

"That was a gift for getting into college," Gabby grumbled. "You should see the car he bought Teddy—it was way more expensive. And the gifts he gives Charlie every year? Totally unfair compared to what Toby and I get. Total favoritism."

Danielle laughed. "Well, girls deserve to be spoiled a little."

"That's exactly what he always says!" Gabby complained. "Every time I bring it up, he brushes me off with that excuse."

That night, the family went out for dinner together. Afterward, Adam took them on a stroll before they returned to rest.

The Next Day – Columbia University Medical School

The graduation ceremony for the Class of 1995, graduating in 1998, was in full swing.

As expected, Adam was chosen as the student representative for the graduating class. He delivered a speech before the diplomas were handed out.

"Adam Dart Duncan," the dean announced.

Wearing his cap and gown, Adam walked confidently onto the stage, shook hands with the dean, and received his diploma before stepping down.

"Steven Gais Murphy."

"Alice Neill Kidman."

"Bianca Sarah Samson."

"Elliot Katie Reed."

"William Tom Haver."

One by one, names were called out, full middle names included, to honor the significance of the occasion.

Each graduate stepped up to shake hands with the dean and receive their diploma, some with excitement, others with calm composure.

When Elliot went up, his cap was so crooked that he ended up just carrying it instead.

"Wow! So this is what a doctor's diploma looks like!"

As soon as Adam stepped down, his younger sister Teddy snatched the diploma from him and opened it—only to stare in confusion.

"It's in Latin," Adam said, taking it back with a playful glare. "See this line here? It says 'Doctor Adam Dart Duncan!'"

"We finally have a doctor in the family!" Their mom was visibly emotional, both as a proud mother and as a nurse who fully understood the prestige of becoming a doctor.

"Not to mention a famous author and the youngest billionaire," Gabby chimed in.

"I know that," their mom shot back with an eye roll. "But sadly, all three honors belong to Adam alone."

Teddy: "..."

Gabby: "..."

Chapter 288: Looked Down Upon

Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons

"Look here! Say cheese!"

After receiving their diplomas, the Duncan family went into full photo-taking mode.

It was the same for everyone else.

Four years of relentless effort had all led up to this very moment.

Many students, especially the girls, were in tears—these past four years had been incredibly tough.

Some parents also couldn't hold back their emotions, crying tears of joy.

Raising a doctor in the family was an immense honor, and the financial investment required was no joke. It was nearly impossible not to get emotional.

What?

Every med student pays for tuition independently with student loans and never relies on their parents?

Yeah, right.

That's a misconception.

Sure, plenty of students take on the burden of loans themselves, but many are supported by their families. Even those who do shoulder their own debt aren't necessarily doing so out of sheer independence—many simply don't have another option.

But now, it had all paid off.

Most of the graduation photos featured students in their academic gowns (regardless of the degree level, they were all referred to as academic gowns—high school graduates even wore similar ones), proudly holding their medical diplomas front and center.

The families attending weren't just parents and siblings; many brought along their boyfriends, girlfriends, fiancés, spouses, and even their children.

These loved ones were arguably even more excited.

Dating or starting a family with a med student was no easy feat.

But now, they could finally see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Though the upcoming residency training wouldn't come with a doctor's full salary, at least they would no longer be pouring money into education. That financial shift alone was a massive relief.

"Adam, it's time to pick up our match letters!"

Elliot called out.

"Got it."

Adam let his family know and followed Elliot and the others into the academic building, where groups of graduates were already heading inside.

At a counter set up to resemble a hospital's nursing station, students stepped forward as their names were called, receiving the envelopes that revealed which hospitals they had matched with for their residencies.

Medical residency applications worked both ways—students applied, and hospitals selected candidates. However, top-tier medical schools had established partnerships with major teaching hospitals, which meant placements were often assigned rather than purely chosen.

Medical schools allocated students based on their academic performance, placing them at hospitals of varying levels, usually within the same city.

For example, most Harvard Medical School graduates stayed in Boston.

Columbia med students, naturally, were assigned within New York.

Of course, students could opt out of their assigned match and apply elsewhere on their own, but without the school's backing, securing a residency required strong personal connections. Otherwise, the application process became significantly more challenging, and the hospitals available weren't as prestigious as those offered through the school's matching system.

This was precisely why some students practically worshipped their senior professors—not only could they impart invaluable medical knowledge, but they could also influence their students' futures. How could you not admire them?

"Where are you placed?"

"Mount Sinai. You?"

"Same here."

As graduates tore open their envelopes, discussions erupted around the room.

Adam and his group remained relatively calm. Their placements had already been determined in advance, and as expected, they were headed to the Medical Center's surgical department.

Adam glanced at a few of the other prominent students, noting their equally composed expressions. Clearly, their placements had been pre-arranged as well.

With a slight smile, Adam waved his letter at Elliot and Bianca.

"Let's go."

He stepped outside—his whole family was still waiting for him.

That day, Adam led the "Duncan Army" on a tour of Columbia University, followed by a grand tour of New York City.

The Next Day

Medical Center

Adam took his family for a full health check-up, focusing especially on his mother.

She had always been in great shape, giving birth to an entire basketball team's worth of kids—all through natural delivery.

But six years ago, when she had Toby, the fifth child, Adam had noticed a clear decline in her physical condition.

Pregnancy at an advanced maternal age carried serious risks.

With her third and fourth children, Gabby and Charlie, she had bounced back quickly, returning to work without any issues.

But by the time she had Toby in her forties, her recovery took much longer.

Now, she was pregnant with her sixth child—at nearly fifty years old. The thought alone was alarming.

Modern medicine had come a long way, but childbirth was still a life-threatening event.

"Leonard, what's the verdict?"

To get the most accurate assessment, Adam had sought out Rachel's father, Leonard, for a professional and unbiased diagnosis.

There was no other choice.

OB-GYN specialists might be more knowledgeable, but their opinions often leaned toward either excessive caution or unnecessary alarmism—neither of which Adam wanted.

As a doctor, he understood their approach, but as a son, he needed the real picture of his mother's condition.

"Your mom is in excellent health—there's nothing to worry about."

Leonard smiled. "I even double-checked with the OB-GYN department head. She's really fine. As long as she takes care of herself, everything should go smoothly. But at her age, this should definitely be the last

one. Another pregnancy would be far too taxing on her body. Though if she did manage to conceive again, she'd be a medical miracle..."

"Got it. Thanks."

Adam sighed in relief and expressed his gratitude.

"In a week, you'll be starting your residency here. Ready for it?"

Leonard clapped Adam on the shoulder with a grin.

"Always."

Adam smiled confidently.

"Good."

Leonard nodded approvingly. "I've arranged for you to work under Dr. Sheni Hiron. She's one of my senior residents—very capable and has a great personality. You'll like her."

"No doubt about it."

Adam smirked.

This was the advantage of having connections—everything was smooth sailing.

Dr. Sheni Hiron was Leonard's resident, which meant she would undoubtedly take special care of Adam.

With both the "county official" (Leonard, the attending physician) and the "direct supervisor" (Sheni, the senior resident) looking out for him, Adam's opportunity to start performing surgeries would come much sooner than most.

The benefits of networking had once again proven their worth.

After a bit more small talk, Adam took the health report and rejoined his parents, first relaying the doctor's cautionary advice before delivering the good news.

"Dad, Mom, why don't you move here?"

After some thought, Adam suggested, "New York has better medical resources..."

"Haha, no need."

His mom laughed and interrupted, "Your dad and I have our whole social circle in Galveston. Moving here would be tough—we wouldn't know anyone! We're happy where we are, and besides, you just said I'm in perfect health."

"Not perfect. Pregnancy at your age is still risky."

Adam reminded her.

"Yeah, yeah, I know my body. You might be a doctor, but you're still just a resident. I, on the other hand, am a seasoned nurse. Greenhorns like you rely on people like us in the hospital!"

His mom said smugly.

Adam: "..."

Chapter 289: The Girl Next Door

Even though his mom's words didn't exactly apply to Adam, he decided to let it slide.

In the love-hate dynamic between nurses and doctors, young intern doctors often became the unfortunate targets of the nurses' teasing—a bit like "the Jade Emperor being beaten by the Monkey King" in their eyes, a memory best left buried.

You might be skilled, but as an intern doctor, you still had to ask the nurses for help with injections.

You might be impressive, but as an intern doctor, you still had to ask the nurses what to do.

You might carry authority now, but as an intern doctor, you had moments of vulnerability in front of the nurses.

Because of all this, veteran nurses had a strong sense of superiority over intern doctors. They weren't even intimidated by attending physicians or sometimes even department heads.

After all, they had the backing of the nurses' union—they could organize a strike if necessary.

As a seasoned nurse, Adam's mom felt a double sense of superiority and joy when she talked down to her son, who was once an intern doctor himself.

Though Adam wasn't quite the "little Bambi" his mom liked to mock, she was pregnant again—so as long as she was happy, Adam let it slide.

Once the major issue of his mom's health was resolved, Adam relaxed. He took the family on a short vacation for a few days before his busy schedule resumed.

"Pfft! What?!"

When Adam heard the results of his assistant's investigation, he nearly spat out his drink.

That's right—Adam had an assistant. As his wealth grew and his investments became increasingly complex, he didn't have the time or mental energy to handle all the details himself, so naturally, he needed to hire someone to manage it.

He also opened a small publishing company to help his friend Max, which needed someone to oversee operations.

A few years ago, Adam had set up a small investment company to manage all his financial ventures. He hired a professional female assistant to handle day-to-day tasks.

Of course, to prevent any risk of embezzlement, Adam kept her authority low. She handled routine tasks like filing taxes, monitoring stock prices, booking flights, and running errands.

Adam maintained tight control over the major investments and financial matters, handling them periodically himself, so there were no major risks.

The assistant's name was Ida Toot. She wasn't particularly attractive, but she was highly competent and had no ambition beyond her well-paying, low-stress job. She worked a comfortable 9-to-5 schedule, not the grueling 24/7 grind.

"Boss, you didn't hear me wrong."

Ida, now with a face full of Adam's spit, looked at him with mild annoyance. Her expression shifted from strange to amused.

"That Danielle you asked me to look into? She's actually acted in movies—specifically, The Girl Next Door series. Want to watch?"

"Of course."

Adam grabbed the videotape, popped it into the player, and was shocked to see that the "girl next door" was indeed his younger brother Gabby's girlfriend. He quickly turned it off as soon as she started transforming on screen, feeling uncomfortable.

He wasn't like Barney; he had no admiration for Fernando Valley's so-called artistic actresses. At that moment, all he felt was disgust.

How could such an odd element infiltrate the happy Duncan family?

"So, boss, what now?"

Ida asked curiously.

"What now? Just let it be." Adam snapped. "Book a flight for my parents tomorrow—but not for Gabby. I need to have a serious talk with him."

This wasn't something his mom could find out about, no matter how irritated Adam felt. He'd have to hold back until his parents left.

"Got it, boss."

Ida left Adam's apartment.

The next day.

His parents returned to Texas.

Danielle went back to California.

Gabby, though, was left behind by Adam.

"Adam, you wanted to talk?"

Gabby rubbed his hands together, looking at Adam with anticipation.

"How did you meet Danielle?"

Adam asked.

"Oh, you know, just bumped into each other on campus—love at first sight. She has this... aura about her."

Gabby seemed completely smitten. Unfortunately, his lack of eloquence left him struggling for words.

"An aura like the girl next door?"

Adam's expression turned strange.

"Exactly!"

Gabby clapped his hands. "She's the embodiment of that 'girl next door' vibe. It's like my dream come true—unlike our actual neighbor, that annoying old lady who's always giving me trouble."

"Maybe because you're always bothering her?"

Adam rolled his eyes. "So, you're serious about her?"

"Of course I am!"

Gabby sounded offended. "I'm serious about every relationship I'm in!"

Adam's mouth twitched, though inside he felt a sense of relief.

That sincerity seemed familiar to him. The fact that Danielle was an actress from the Fernando Valley probably wouldn't hit Gabby too hard.

"Do you even know what she does for a living?"

"Yeah, she's an actress."

Gabby answered matter-of-factly. "In fact, she's technically a senior in my field. Maybe we'll collaborate on a film someday."

Gabby studied art design, which could be applied to both game development and filmmaking, especially behind the scenes.

"Collaborate on a film?"

Adam nearly laughed. "Why don't you watch some of her 'films' first, then we'll talk."

He played the tape for Gabby and left him alone to watch while he called home to check if their parents had landed safely.

Everything had gone smoothly. After chatting with his parents for a while, Adam hung up and felt a bit uneasy.

Wait—something was off.

Gabby had been quiet for way too long. That wasn't normal.

Adam rushed back to the living room—

—and froze.

Instead of crying or shouting in despair, Gabby was sitting there, eyes glued to the screen, watching The Girl Next Door series with genuine fascination.

"Did I put in the wrong tape?"

Adam panicked and checked. Nope, it was the same Girl Next Door series.

"Gabby, are you okay?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

Gabby pointed at the screen, smiling. "Look at that—my girlfriend's acting is incredible! Oh my God, I'm dating a true artist from the Fernando Valley. This is amazing!"

Adam was speechless. After carefully studying Gabby's expression, he realized his happiness wasn't fake.

"Holy shit. Is Gabby basically Barney 2.0?"

Adam kept him around for an extra day, observing him in secret. Eventually, both amused and concerned, he had Ida book Gabby's flight back to California.

The good news? Gabby genuinely didn't care. His psychological resilience was on another level.

The bad news? He was practically a clone of Barney Stinson, truly believing dating a Fernando Valley actress was something to be proud of.

The Duncan family was supposed to be honest and wholesome. How had they ended up raising a second Barney?

Adam couldn't help but regret sending Gabby to study in California. This was freedom gone too far.

Yep, that had to be it.

Chapter 290: Orientation Training

After seeing off Gabe, the third brother, Adam spent the last two days in Boston.

Juno, Karen, and Heather—who had flown in from Texas—were already waiting for him.

The four of them had a wonderful time together.

Talking with Juno helped Adam finally put aside the troubling thought that Gabe might be a second Barney.

Of course, when Juno suggested that Gabe could have been influenced by him, Adam firmly disagreed. For the first time, he found himself doubting Juno's judgment.

After all, Juno was only human, not a god.

Since Heather had a tight schedule and they had limited time together, Adam knew better than to dwell on this issue.

Two days passed in the blink of an eye.

Sunday Night

At the airport, Adam and Heather bid each other a reluctant farewell.

He flew back to New York.

Heather returned to Texas.

Juno stayed in Boston.

As an outstanding graduate of Harvard Medical School—despite the many students who got in through connections or sheer luck—her academic performance remained top-tier.

As a result, she was placed at Massachusetts General Hospital, one of the best.

Karen, having studied nursing, found the transition easy. After years of assisting Adam and Juno in hunting and dissections, she was more than prepared.

Monday Morning

Adam got up early, got ready, and arrived at the medical center well ahead of time.

Today was orientation day.

Several people were already waiting there.

"Adam."

A young woman of South Asian descent spotted him and approached. "Do you remember me? I'm..."

"Cristina Yang."

Adam smiled. "Juno's classmate. You and Meredith really gave up those great hospitals in Boston just to come to New York and compete with us?"

"Competition is everywhere. It's the same no matter where you go."

Cristina raised an eyebrow, unconcerned.

"Where's Meredith? Didn't you come with her?" Adam asked.

"No."

Cristina shook her head. "She's staying at her mother's house, while I rented a place on my own. I don't like living with others. She wanted me to go to a bar last night, but I turned her down since we had orientation today. She's probably still asleep."

"You didn't wake her up?"

Adam chuckled.

"She'll wake up."

Cristina smirked.

So much for sisterly love.

Adam understood immediately. When Cristina said, competition is everywhere, she meant it.

Meredith might be her close friend, but she was also her biggest rival. If Meredith didn't perform well, many of her opportunities would fall to Cristina instead.

So why would she wake Meredith up?

Adam even wondered if Cristina had chosen not to live with Meredith precisely to keep some distance and avoid unnecessary complications.

"By the way, thanks for helping me on that flight."

Cristina changed the subject and thanked him.

"No problem."

Adam glanced at her briefly.

They casually chatted about some hospital gossip, and time passed quickly.

More interns gradually arrived.

Orientation Begins

"Is everyone here?"

A bald man in a suit looked over the group, checking his list.

"Meredith isn't here yet," Cristina whispered to Adam.

"Don't worry. The head of surgery is a close friend of her mother's."

Adam smiled knowingly.

"Good point."

Cristina nodded.

For regular interns, the first few days were nerve-wracking—they had to be extra cautious to avoid breaking any hospital rules and getting kicked out of the residency program.

But for someone like Meredith, who had strong connections, the rules didn't apply in quite the same way.

This was probably why, despite knowing today was important, she still felt comfortable drinking at a bar the night before.

"Follow me."

The bald man didn't call names. He simply led the group into an office and had them take their seats.

"I'm Jason Dawn, the hospital's legal advisor. Today, I'm here to give you an orientation, so you understand what you can and cannot do."

He glanced around. "Now, can anyone tell me what the most important thing is for a doctor?"

"Caring for patients?"

A young intern raised his hand and answered with a smile.

Jason let out a dry laugh.

"See? This is exactly why you're all so naive! Caring for patients? No! The most important thing you need to remember is—the hospital does not want to be sued! Lawsuits are never a good thing..."

What followed was a long list of lawsuit cases involving doctors. The sheer variety of legal troubles—many stemming from doctors who had meant well but were still sued—made everyone's scalp tingle with unease.

"Good."

Jason scanned the room and, seeing that everyone had taken his words to heart, nodded with satisfaction.

"Now, let's say you've done everything you can, but an accident still happens. What do you do then? Any takers?"

"Deny everything?"

Cristina raised her hand.

"Exactly!"

Jason's eyes lit up, and he pointed at Cristina.

"Deny, deny, deny. Of course, that applies when dealing with the patient. But if the patient is already dead, well... then you can say whatever you want."

He even chuckled at his own remark.

No one laughed with him.

Jason clicked his tongue in disappointment and continued drilling this legal mindset into them.

Meeting the Department Heads

"Alright, my job here is done. Your department heads will take over now. I'm sure they have plenty to tell you."

About ten minutes later, two doctors in white coats—one white, one Black—appeared at the door.

Jason finally wrapped up his speech.

"Surgical interns, follow me."

The Black doctor, an older man with short, graying hair, spoke briefly before turning to leave.

Cristina was the first to jog after him.

"Let's go."

Adam nodded at Elijah, a fellow internal medicine intern, and gestured for Bianca to follow. Then, he joined the surgical group.

The interns followed the surgical department head into a room that, once the lights were turned on, was revealed to be a practice surgical suite.

"This is where you'll be training," the department head began.

He looked around at the group and started his speech.

"Today, you come here full of hope, eager to compete..."

At that moment, a young woman slipped in through the door.

The department head glanced at her but didn't say anything about her tardiness. Instead, he continued:

"In medical school, you were students learning how to become doctors. But as of today, you are doctors.

"The next seven years of your residency will be both the best and worst years of your life."

Standing with his arms crossed, he spoke in a calm but firm tone.

"You will be pushed to the brink of collapse. Look around. Say hello to your competition.

"By the end, eight of you will transfer to less demanding specialties. Five of you will crack under pressure. Two of you will be asked to leave.

"This is your starting line—your battlefield.

"Where you end up depends entirely on you."

Adam scanned the room.

There were 20 surgical interns in total.

According to the department head, only five would make it to the end...

Let the games begin.