

TV Show 391

Chapter 391: The Advantage Is Mine

Ted was sent off.

Adam took Joe to get a CT scan.

"So, how's it look?" Joe asked, staring nervously at Adam as he studied the CT images.

"You'll need to be admitted. Tomorrow, when Dr. Shephard gets here..." Adam started, but Joe cut him off before he could finish.

"Just tell me straight up. I trust your diagnosis," Joe said, his face pale as a ghost.

In the U.S., not every condition gets you a hospital bed. To keep things efficient and profitable, hospitals here push you out as soon as they can. If you don't have to be admitted, you won't be. Even after surgery, they'll give you a couple days to recover, then it's "see ya later." Barney should've been discharged ages ago, but he was in a VIP room, shelling out big bucks daily, so the hospital wasn't exactly rushing him out the door.

Joe knew how pricey a hospital stay could get, but right now, money was the last thing on his mind. All he could think about was what being admitted meant.

"From the CT, it looks like the artery at the base of your skull is ballooning out—a subarachnoid hemorrhage from a pretty massive aneurysm. Surgery's going to be tricky," Adam explained. "But don't freak out just yet. Dr. Shephard's one of the best in the game. I'm sure he'll come up with a solid plan."

Joe sat there, stunned, for what felt like forever before croaking out, "How much is this gonna cost?"

"No clue," Adam said with a shake of his head. "We don't even have a surgical plan yet, so there's no way to estimate it. Even once we do, costs can shift until the surgery's done. You know how it goes."

In the U.S., treatment comes first. You don't see the bill until about two months after you're discharged. That's when the real fun begins—a moment that's basically "heaven one second, hell the next." The hospital sends you a tab covering every little thing from your stay, and it's often way beyond what you'd braced yourself for.

Say you figure it'll be a big hit—maybe tens of thousands of dollars—and you mentally prep for a max of, like, a hundred grand. Then the bill arrives. It's not tens of thousands. It's not even a hundred thousand. It's not even a few hundred thousand. It's over a million.

Surprise!

Shocked yet?

For someone with shaky health or a weak stomach, that bill alone might trigger a stroke or brain bleed. The average American, pulling in maybe thirty-something grand a year and living paycheck to paycheck, suddenly has to face a million-dollar debt dropped out of nowhere. Without eating or drinking a dime, it'd take thirty or forty years to pay off. Even if you stretch it out—say, twenty grand a year—it's still over fifty years. Picture an eighty-year-old guy delivering packages, still chipping away at that bill.

Can't pay? Oh, the hospital's definitely suing you. They'll strip you down to nothing, tank your credit, and basically exile you from society. It's a wild ride you've got zero control over. If you want to live—if you agree to treatment—you're stuck playing by their rules. CT scan? You're getting it. MRI? Done. Some minor procedure first? Yup, that too.

"Don't stress too much," Adam said, trying to lighten the mood. "Look on the bright side—this isn't some mystery illness. You don't need to trek over to Princeton's hospital to see Dr. House."

"That's... actually good news," Joe said with a bitter laugh.

He'd heard the legends about Dr. House next door. That guy tackled weird, unsolvable cases by running endless tests and throwing experimental drugs at you. Before he even nailed down a diagnosis, you'd have to survive his razor-sharp tongue and a gauntlet of procedures. Sometimes your condition hadn't even worsened yet, but House's meddling would knock you half-dead anyway. Some of those tests were invasive, and the drugs? Permanent damage, no take-backs.

If you were lucky enough to get cured and sent home, you'd still be stuck with lingering side effects—and then that monstrous bill would hit, making you wonder if it'd been better to just check out early. And if you ever replayed House's snarky attitude in your head, you or your family might be tempted to take him out first. Honestly, the fact that House was still kicking after all these years was a miracle.

So yeah, getting a clear diagnosis—even something like cancer—was better than being stuck with an undiagnosed mess.

Seeing Joe's condition was stable for now, with no signs of worsening, Adam got him admitted and stuck around to keep an eye on him overnight. The aneurysm was huge and in a lousy spot—almost impossible to clip. That was the biggest hurdle for surgery.

Adam could only think of one cutting-edge option: a "stillness surgery." Cool Joe's body down, stop his heart, drain his blood, put him in a fake-death state. With no blood flowing to the brain, the aneurysm's rupture risk would drop to nearly zero. Finish the surgery in under forty-five minutes, restart the heart, and boom—success.

It'd be Dr. Shephard leading the charge, but he'd probably call in Dr. Burke to handle the heart and blood-draining part. With Meredith currently at odds with Shephard, and Cristina—fresh off Burke's "one-shot wonder"—still recovering, Adam figured no one was likely to steal this surgery from him.

Yeah, it felt a little shady to admit, but he was pretty pumped. This was a doctor chasing the thrill of mastering their craft. Besides, he and Joe were barely acquaintances—not even friends, really.

The next morning, Adam was ready to roll, prepped to assist Dr. Shephard with Joe's evaluation. But Shephard hadn't shown up yet. Instead, someone Adam wasn't thrilled to see walked in.

"Cristina? What are you doing here?"

"I'm fine now, so obviously I'm back to work," Cristina said with a smirk that wasn't quite a smile. "What's this? You're not happy to see me? Got a juicy surgery lined up or something?"

"Did you tell Burke?" Adam asked, keeping his tone casual. "You should probably clear that up with him."

Cristina's face darkened for a second. But she was a razor-sharp genius—she snapped out of it fast, grinning. "I'll go talk to Burke right now. Let's see what surgery's got you so worked up. Oh, and don't get me wrong—I'm grateful for you, but I'm not passing up a good case."

With that, she spun around and headed for Burke's office.

"No backdoor deals, okay? Fair fight!" Adam called after her, half-joking.

This kind of cutting-edge, multi-doctor surgery needed skill and speed. Leonard, Adam's ideal pick, was solid on technique but couldn't match Burke's prime-of-life pace. If they needed a cardiothoracic expert, even with some tension over the interim surgical chief gig, Shephard would probably still pick Burke.

And if Burke was in, Adam's edge took a hit. Sure, he had a favor owed from Burke, but that didn't stack up to Cristina's "girlfriend" card. At least Meredith wouldn't be stirring the pot this time, and Adam still had Shephard's goodwill. Plus, he was Joe's admitting doc and the top intern in the game.

His odds were still better than Cristina's.

Yup, advantage is mine.

Chapter 392: I'm Popping Out!

Medical Center. Ward.

Christina vented for a bit and then left.

"Joe, when you've made up your mind, just have the nurse page me," Adam said with a smile before heading out too.

It's a tough call to make. Heaven knows when Joe will finally figure it out. Adam can't just stick around waiting forever.

As for footing Joe's surgery bill himself? Yeah, that's not happening. Their relationship isn't that close. Joe's not some innocent bystander who got hit by a car, leaving behind a grieving widow and kid. Even in that case, Adam had helped out afterward in a quieter, more tactful way—no grand gestures.

As the saying goes: "A handful of rice earns gratitude; a bucket breeds resentment." That's how it works back in Dongguo, and it's even truer here where money rules everything.

As for Joe, Adam's thinking maybe he'll invest in the bar later. That way, Joe could cover his bills and keep running his business. Of course, he'd have to hand over a chunk of the profits from then on—going from full-on boss to half a worker.

Back in the day, he'd bust his hump and barely scrape by. Now, he could slack off a little and still make decent cash. Who knows? Joe might even warm up to the working-stiff life. Beats selling the bar and drifting aimlessly, right?

Adam, the "compassionate capitalist," already has Joe's future mapped out in his head.

Emergency Room.

Adam swings by again, figuring he'll see a few patients during a lull. Sure, they're not life-or-death cases worth "+0.01 goodwill points," but every little bit helps. Plus, it's a chance to sharpen his skills—two birds, one stone.

"Adam, over here!" Susan spots him, her big eyes lighting up as she waves him over.

"Dr. Lewis," Adam says, hustling toward her.

"There's a guy in Exam Room 6 who won't stop hiccupping. He's asking for a male doctor. You're up," Susan says with a quirky little grin.

"Got it," Adam replies, catching the vibe behind her smile.

Patients with "special requests" like that usually aren't dealing with something straightforward. It's often the kind of issue they're too shy to spill to just anyone—especially not a female doctor. This hiccup guy probably has something he doesn't want a woman checking out. Maybe his "little brother" is acting up.

Truth is, Adam's got zero interest in those kinds of cases. But that's the gig—doctors don't get to pick and choose.

Exam Room 6.

"Mr. Brad, when did the hiccups start?" Adam asks, giving him a quick once-over.

"Hic! All day yesterday. Nonstop. Hic!" Brad answers between jolts.

"Anything else going on besides the hiccups?" Adam prods. "Like, any discomfort anywhere?"

"Nope," Brad says, shaking his head. "Just the hiccups. Hic!"

"Alright," Adam nods. "You're good to go, then. They'll fade on their own."

"Wait, Doc, you're not gonna do anything?" Brad stares at him. "There's gotta be some trick to zap these hiccups fast, right?"

Adam's eyes narrow, his face blank. "What are you getting at?"

"I read about this one treatment..." Brad hesitates. "Some doctor even won a prize for it..."

Adam's lip twitches.

Oh, he gets it now. This guy's "condition" just clicked.

The "prize-winning treatment" Brad's hinting at? Rectal massage to stop hiccups. The doc who came up with it snagged a Nobel Prize—except it wasn't the real deal. It was the Ig Nobel, the spoof award for weird science.

Adam turns and heads for the door.

"Doc!" Brad calls out, panicking as Adam twists the knob. "You haven't treated me yet!"

"You're fine already," Adam deadpans. "You just talked a whole bunch—did you hiccup once?"

"Hic!" Brad's face freezes as he forces one out.

It's so fake even he knows it, and he sheepishly drops his head.

Outside the Exam Room.

Adam shakes his head, exasperated. Every time he thinks he's seen it all, patients roll in with a fresh lesson: You ain't seen nothing yet—brace yourself! If you can imagine it, it's probably happened.

"Adam, what's up with Hiccup Guy?" Susan asks with a grin as he steps out.

"A faker," Adam says with a wry smile.

"Drug seeker?" Susan nods knowingly.

The pill-popping scene in the States is wild—addicts will pull out all the stops to score. If it's got a buzz, they're snorting it, swallowing it, whatever. It's like those stories of the "fighting nation" chugging mouthwash, perfume, or windshield fluid just to catch a high when the vodka runs dry.

No cash? They scam for it. No drugs? They scam for those too. Hospitals are their go-to hunting grounds. They bounce from ER to ER, spinning their sob stories—some even hurt themselves on purpose—just to trick a prescription out of a doctor.

One quick hit, and they're golden! Sometimes you know they're gaming you, but as a doctor, you're stuck playing dumb. Their pain's real enough, and if you don't treat it, you're the one breaking the law.

Doctors aren't about to play hero—just follow the protocol and move on.

"Nah," Adam shakes his head. "Not drugs this time."

Susan, a seasoned resident, stares at him, jaw practically on the floor.

It's the golden rule of hospitals: there's nothing you can dream up that a patient won't top.

Adam's mouth quirks. He's right there with her on that one.

Emmm...

Beep. Beep.

His pager goes off, snapping him out of his thoughts.

"Something's up in the ward," he says to Susan, then bolts toward the patient rooms.

When he gets there, Dr. Shephard and Dr. Burke are already on the scene. Christina's off to the side, smirking like she's enjoying the show.

What makes Adam's stomach drop is the vaguely familiar face by the bed: Steven Murphy.

Joe, lying there, catches Adam's eye and gives him an apologetic look.

Adam can already piece it together.

"Joe's decided to go ahead with the surgery and wants Dr. Murphy on the team," Dr. Shephard announces once everyone's gathered.

"Dr. Murphy, you can start the pre-op checks," Dr. Burke says, lips tight, voice flat.

"Alright," Steven Murphy replies, shooting Adam a quick smile before heading off.

Chapter 393: The Advantage Is His

Ward Room

"Sorry, Adam."

Joe's face was full of guilt. "I don't want it to be like this, but I just can't afford that kind of surgery bill."

"I get it."

Adam nodded, turned, and walked out.

Cristina hurried after him. "You really get it? We've been fighting tooth and nail over this, and then that filthy-rich trust fund kid swoops in with his money and beats us. You're not pissed?"

"Of course I'm pissed," Adam said, his face cold. "Understanding doesn't mean I'm okay with it."

If it weren't for him, Joe would've been flattened by that freaked-out pizza delivery guy last night—no chance to even get this fancy donation from mega-rich Murphy that covered all his medical costs.

Joe knew how much this surgery meant to Adam. He'd even gone head-to-head with Cristina over it and called out Acting Chief Burke right to his face.

But Joe didn't even give Adam a heads-up.

Adam had the upper hand, and then—bam—dragon-in-the-face moment.

A simple "Sorry, I didn't mean it" wasn't gonna cut it.

"So, what are you gonna do about it?" Cristina asked, her gossip-loving soul practically on fire.

"Nothing."

Adam's face was blank. "Joe's the patient. He gets to pick his doctor. What can I do?"

"I don't buy it," Cristina said, shaking her head. "Murphy's some spoiled second-gen rich kid, sure, but you're a first-gen powerhouse yourself. No way you're just swallowing this."

"You're not seriously suggesting I go flex my wallet against Murphy, are you?" Adam shot her a look like she'd lost it.

"No, no," Cristina faltered. "But I just don't peg you as the type to let things slide. You're gonna get even, right?"

"You and Burke sort out your mess yet?" Adam dodged, throwing it back at her.

Even if he was fuming and plotting ways to cool off, he wasn't about to broadcast it to the whole hospital.

That's just impotent rage.

Only an idiot would do that.

Smart people keep it under wraps.

Cristina's face darkened, and she stormed off.

Earlier, when Burke changed his tune, she'd been annoyed but understood. Adam had a point, after all.

Still, she'd marched to Burke's office demanding an explanation.

Normally, rational Cristina wouldn't pull that.

But now? After she'd just defused the bomb Burke had planted—one that nearly blew her up—her hormones were all over the place. She needed to let loose a little.

"You telling me how to do my job?"

Burke's sharp comeback had stopped her dead in her tracks.

Then came the real gut punch.

Burke softened his tone and started talking about their relationship.

At first, she didn't catch on. It wasn't until an awkward silence hung in the air that it hit her: Burke, for the sake of his career and the surgical chief gig, was decisively cutting her loose.

AKA, she'd been dumped.

Her calm now? Pure bravado. One poke from Adam, and it cracked.

Afternoon – Observation Gallery

Adam sat in the viewing seats, quietly watching the OR below.

The other interns kept sneaking glances at him, their eyes dripping with schadenfreude.

Word had spread: Adam got dragoned in the face.

All their usual envy and resentment finally had a chance to vent.

"Joe's got some crazy luck."

"Once he's better, he's gotta treat us all to drinks at his bar—free night, right?"

"Dream on, that's not happening."

"Who at the med center doesn't know Joe?"

"He's been running that bar across the street for 14 years. Everyone's got a Joe story."

Dr. Nazi Bailey walked in and overheard, glancing at the speaker.

George caught the look and couldn't resist. "Dr. Bailey, you know Joe too?"

"Yeah, I do," Bailey said, gazing down at Joe, splayed out like a starfish in the OR. "Back when I was an intern, I was the only woman in our group. I didn't know anyone, and no one knew me—except Joe. He got me."

"So, you and Joe...?"

All eyes turned to her. George voiced what everyone was thinking.

Bailey clocked the stares, turned around, and scanned the room with a chilly smirk. "That's all you clowns ever think about, huh? That's why you're stuck with STDs! If you put half that energy into your work, you wouldn't be up here just watching every time."

"No matter how good you are, you still get shoved aside to spectate," someone muttered under their breath.

"Hahaha!"

The room erupted, all eyes on Adam, who sat there unfazed, as they let out their gleeful cackles.

"Laugh it up. This is the only time you'll get to," Bailey said, glancing at Adam. "The one who laughs loudest and lasts longest—that's the real winner. I've got a partial colectomy coming up, and I need the best intern. Dr. Duncan, you in?"

"Absolutely," Adam said, caught off guard for a second.

"Good."

Bailey nodded, eyes back on the OR.

George shot Adam an envious look.

The other interns stopped laughing.

Bailey earned her "Nazi" nickname for a reason—her tough-as-nails style and her skill and clout.

Sure, she'd overlooked Adam before, prioritizing her own interns for chances.

But Adam actually liked her.

Like she'd just roasted George and the others for—"Focus instead of obsessing over dirty nonsense"—she lived that herself.

She looked out for her interns, cared about patients, held her own with the higher-ups without kissing ass, and quietly honed her craft.

No piling on praise when you're up, no kicking you when you're down.

Now, she was throwing him a lifeline—though Adam wasn't exactly drowning.

To borrow a line from Groot Zhou: She's got a warm heart.

Her rep made total sense.

The resentment Adam had been stewing over Joe and Murphy softened a bit in this little glow of human decency.

Well, just a bit.

A dragon-in-the-face moment like this? Unless Adam could pull a Stephen Chow and smack it back hard, there's no way he'd just let it slide.

That'd leave a knot in his gut!

Operating Room

"...Cooling the body?"

"Lowering the temp keeps the tissues viable before blood perfusion."

The OR was freezing. Steven Murphy shivered as he answered Burke's pre-op question.

"Body temp's 60°F," a nurse called out.

"Okay, time of death," Burke said, stepping up to clamp the external vessels.

"Heartbeat stopped," the nurse noted.

"We've got 45 minutes. Start the clock," Dr. Shepherd ordered.

The nurse hit the timer.

Steven Murphy glanced up at Adam in the gallery.

Their eyes met.

Adam read him loud and clear.

This was a declaration of war.

Before, Murphy had been all high-and-mighty, wanting a "fair fight."

So whether it was four years of med school or the past couple months interning, Adam had always come out on top.

Now, Murphy had an epiphany. His real edge wasn't his brain or his study skills—it was being the pharma tycoon's only son.

Smarts and learning? He'd never outdo Adam.

But everything else?

Yeah.

The advantage was his.

Chapter 394: I Won't Hit You

Observation Room, Operating Theater.

The cutting-edge "still surgery" is underway.

"Eight minutes left!"

The nurse pipes up as the timer hits 37 minutes.

"Shephard, we need to start rewarming now," Dr. Burke says, mid-procedure.

"Please hand me the bipolar forceps, thanks," Dr. Shephard replies, calm as ever.

"We need to rewarm now, Shephard!" Burke repeats, his tone sharper.

"Hang on," Shephard says, eyes glued to the endoscope as he works. "I can't get behind the aneurysm yet. If I can just reach the back..."

"I'm rewarming now!" Burke snaps, his voice rising to show he's not budging.

If they miss the window, delayed rewarming could mean Joe's heart won't restart—no matter how perfectly Shephard clips that aneurysm. This is the thoracic surgery expert, who rules the heart, laying down the law to the neurosurgery guy, who reigns over the brain.

"Done," Shephard finally says after a tense two-second pause, finishing the aneurysm fix.

"You sure?" Burke shoots him a look.

"I'm always sure," Shephard says with a smug edge. "My part's handled. Over to you, Chief!"

"Heh," Burke chuckles, catching the dig at his interim surgical chief gig.

Interim or not, it's still the top spot. Scoring a point against a rival in the race for permanent chief? That's

a rush no "indescribable thrill" can touch. He made the right call sticking with this game.

"Alright, folks, let's grab Joe before he checks in with the Big Guy upstairs. Start rewarming!"

"Release the clamps!"

"Turn on the pump-reinfuse the blood!"

"Monitor cerebral perfusion pressure!"

"Keep arterial BP above 60!"

Burke rattles off orders like a drill sergeant, and the OR crew jumps into action, smooth and steady.

Up in the observation seats, Adam watches with a cool, detached gaze.

Steven Murphy hasn't slipped up once. Not that Adam's surprised. In a surgery like this, interns are just glorified assistants. If you're sharp, you get a little more to do. If you're green, you hang back and look busy. Unless some soap-opera-level drama hits, there's no room for screwups.

If every case turned into a theatrical mess, teaching hospitals would've shut down ages ago. There'd been rumors about that once—"Avoid hospitals in summer and fall!" Fresh med school grads flood in, and supposedly, rookie mistakes spike the death rates. Total myth, though. Debunked hard. Interns who aren't up to snuff just fetch tools and watch. Only when an attending trusts your skills—and knows you won't tank their rep—do they let you touch anything. Even then, it's with a tight leash.

Steven Murphy paid his way into this OR. Shephard and Burke might not say it out loud, but they're not thrilled. In a life-or-death zone like this, skill's the only badge that matters. So, they've barely tossed him a single task. Learning opportunity? Barely a scratch above zero.

Steven knows it too. A few hundred grand down the drain? He doesn't care. This is just his way of sending Adam a message.

The surgery wraps up without a hitch.

Steven steps out of the OR, flashing his polished gentleman's smile—until he rounds a corner, stumbles back a step, and nearly drops the act.

"Adam, you..."

"Steven, congrats," Adam says, leaning against the wall and holding out a hand.

Steven freezes, torn. He knows about Adam's freakish strength-the guy once hoisted a massive tumor for fourteen hours straight without breaking a sweat. Word spread like wildfire through the hospital; people still bring it up in awe.

And now, after Steven just stepped on Adam's toes, here's Adam, offering a handshake. Steven's half-convinced Adam's about to crush his hand into dust.

"Relax," Adam says, switching from a handshake to a pat on Steven's stiff shoulder. "We're

classmates and colleagues. I'm not gonna hurt you."

"Hurt.." Steven forces a grin. "You wouldn't dare, right?"

"Heh," Adam chuckles. "We should catch up properly. Work's still on now, but how about dinner after? Let's grab a bite."

" "

Steven's never been the tough-guy type-just a proud, prickly rich kid. Against Adam's quiet confidence, he's always felt a little shaky. Now, he's standing there, blanking on any excuse to wiggle out.

Ring-ring!

Saved by the bell-his phone goes off. Steven pulls it out, lights up with relief, and answers. After a quick chat, he waves the phone at Adam. "Sorry, man, my parents want me home tonight."

"No worries," Adam says with a knowing smirk. "Didn't Mr. and Mrs. Murphy mention? I'm the one who set up this dinner."

He gives Steven's shoulder another pat, then strolls off with a grin.

Steven's jaw drops.

What the hell?

You called my parents?!

Dazed, he stumbles back to their clinic and immediately unloads on Alice, his go-to confidante. "Alice, what's his deal?"

"Uh..." Alice stifles a laugh, choosing her words. "Maybe he's got something to say to your dad."

"Isn't that just tattling to my folks?!" Steven fumes. "And what's he thinking? Why would my parents take his side?"

"Well.." Alice treads lightly. "Maybe he figures he's on the same level as your dad.."

"What?!" Steven blinks.

"Not in medicine," she clarifies fast. "In the rich-guy world. I mean, he's the youngest self-made billionaire out there. He's got the clout to talk to your dad mano-a-mano."

Steven's stunned again, muttering, "Okay, but why?"

Alice wrinkles her brow. Steven's her trusty backup-great family, smart, capable. Just... a little soft around the edges. Not surprising, though. As the only heir to Murphy Pharma, his mom coddled him growing up. Even now, he can be clueless about how the world works.

Why's Adam going straight to Peter Murphy? Simple: he doesn't see Steven as an equal worth negotiating with. Why waste time bickering with the kid when he can tackle the source of Steven's swagger-his dad?

Convince Peter, and Steven's got no leg to stand on in this rivalry. How Adam plans to pull that off, though? Alice can't quite figure it.

Money-wise, Adam's billions don't stack up to the Murphy family's tens of billions. Status? Adam's just a flashy arts-world name—too flaky. Meanwhile, Murphy Pharma's network, built over years, is a juggernaut Adam can't touch.

Chapter 395: The Murphy Family Dinner

New York - The Murphy Mansion

The dinner Adam had set up completely threw Steven Murphy off his game.

So much so that he clocked out early and headed home.

His father, Peter Murphy, wasn't back yet.

It was just his mom at the house.

Steven spilled the whole story.

"Oh, I see," Mrs. Murphy said with a smile. "You did it for the patient's sake, right? A couple hundred grand's no big deal. As long as you're happy and learning something, I don't see the problem."

"Mom, then why do you think Adam set up this dinner?" Steven asked, puzzled.

"Maybe he's trying to play nice with you," she replied breezily. "Don't worry about what's going on in his head."

"Yeah!"

Steven perked up, soaking in his mom's confidence.

Exactly!

Who cares what Adam thinks? It's about what he thinks!

With his doubts melting away, mama's boy Steven and his mother started chatting about funny hospital stories, laughing and bonding like old times.

"Sir's back," the maid announced after a call from the lobby downstairs. She told Mrs. Murphy, then headed to the door and opened it.

The private elevator dinged.

Pharma titan Peter Murphy stepped out, his face a mask of cool indifference.

"Dad!"

Steven jumped up to greet him.

Mrs. Murphy stepped forward, taking her husband's briefcase and helping him out of his coat. "Hm."

Peter sized up his son with a glance and gave a slight nod. "This Adam Duncan-he's your classmate, right? You two were never tight. Why's he inviting us to dinner now?"

"Uh.."

Under his father's piercing stare, all the bold CEO vibes Steven had picked up from his mom vanished. Because his dad? He was the real deal. Steven? Not even close.

"Here's the thing.." Mrs. Murphy jumped in, brushing it off with a casual recap.

"That's reckless!" Peter snapped, his brow furrowing. "You're a doctor, Steven. Your job is to quietly sharpen your skills, impress your superiors with your talent, earn their respect, and get more surgeries. That's how you grow it's a virtuous cycle. You don't buy your way into an OR!"

"Honey, what's the big deal?" Mrs. Murphy tried to smooth it over. "It's just one surgery. A few hundred thousand. Steven said it's cutting-edge-great learning experience."

"What do you know about it?" Peter shot back. "This isn't about the money! Adam Duncan's a billionaire too-the youngest one out there. You ever see him throwing cash around like that? No! Even when Steven snatched his surgery right in front of everyone, he didn't flash his wallet to take it back!"

"That's because he knows he can't outspend Steven," Mrs. Murphy countered.

"Steven's money?" Peter's gaze sharpened as his usually gentle wife went full mama bear. "What money does he have? That's my money! And without my say-so, no one's touching it."

Mrs. Murphy clammed up.

Steven dropped his head, quiet as a quail.

Peter's expression softened a bit as he sighed. "Adam Duncan's fortune might not match mine, but he built it from scratch in the arts. His liquid cash might even top mine.

A creative kid like that, striking it rich so young-he should be the cockiest guy in the room. If something like this happened, he wouldn't hesitate to throw down, whether it's against you or even me. But has he?

No!

Not only did he not get mad or flex his wealth over the surgery, he reached out to us, trying to smooth over any bad blood.

That's maturity!

Steven, you and him are classmates and colleagues.

You're both loaded—you didn't need to grind through med school or put up with all that crap.

But you both did.

Why? Because you're cut from the same cloth. You should've been best friends—the perfect pair to be best friends.

I told you this back when you started med school.

But you didn't listen.

Fine! If you can't be best buds, at least don't clash—just be regular classmates.

But what are you doing now, Steven?

You're stealing his surgery, picking a fight. For what?

You short on cutting-edge cases? If you really want them, I can ship you somewhere tomorrow where you'll get groundbreaking surgeries every day!

You up for that?"

Steven's head sank lower, regret creeping in.

"Peter," Mrs. Murphy said softly, unable to watch her son squirm.

"Ugh."

Peter shook his head at his son's meekness. "Fine, forget the best friends thing. Let's talk about buying surgeries. Even if it wasn't Adam Duncan's case, you still shouldn't have done it."

"Why not?" Mrs. Murphy asked, confused.

Steven peeked up at his dad too.

"Because it's not just about the money," Peter said gravely. "If this gets out, Steven's a target. Every patient he operates on will demand he foot the bill. Then what?"

Sure, we can afford it.

But what's the point of being a doctor who only gets cases by paying for them? And if some fearless crook comes along to scam us, we might not plug that hole. Worst of all, how do we keep Steven safe?

Didn't the med center just have a shooting a few days ago?

I'll tell you this: the med center's tame compared to the rest of the country. Hospital shootings happen way too often across the U.S.

If Steven's wealth gets exposed and every schemer's got their eyes on him, how dangerous would that

be?"

"Oh!" Mrs. Murphy gasped, startled. "That's terrifying! Maybe, Steven, you should quit medicine and come home to learn the family business with your dad."

"Steven, what do you think?" Peter asked, turning to his son.

"I still want to be a doctor," Steven said, his face pale but resolute.

Like his dad said, he had everything-yet he'd busted his ass through med school because he loved it.

"Fine. But you've got to keep a low profile. No more buying surgeries," Peter warned. "And tonight, you're apologizing to Adam Duncan-sincerely!"

Trust me, he's already thought all this through. He hasn't spread some 'free healthcare courtesy of Murphy' rumor because he's in the same boat as you-rich and a doctor by choice.

Unless you push him too far, he's not about to do something dumb that screws you both.

But if you keep poking him, do you really think a guy who made it big so young is gonna keep taking it?"

"Steven, listen to your dad," Mrs. Murphy said, her tune completely flipped.

"Yeah," Steven mumbled. What else could he say?

Nightfall

When Adam arrived, he didn't even get a chance to drop a subtle threat before Peter laid out his whole thought process. Adam couldn't help but admire how Peter had built his empire from nothing—success

like that wasn't random.

He accepted Steven's apology.

Better to bury the hatchet than keep a grudge.

Especially since the other side's firepower outclassed his.

Still, Adam was curious-what flipped Steven Murphy so fast?

"No big reason," Steven said, eyes down. "You're just getting bigger at the hospital, and the gap between

us keeps growing. I didn't want to fall too far behind."

"Heh." Adam chuckled.

After Dinner

Back at his apartment, Adam dialed a number.

As someone said: Own your mistakes, and take your lumps standing tall!

Steven had owned up.

But he hadn't taken his lumps yet.

How could this be over...?

Chapter 396: I Won't Hit You

Observation Room, Operating Theater.

The cutting-edge "still surgery" is underway.

"Eight minutes left!"

The nurse pipes up as the timer hits 37 minutes.

"Shephard, we need to start rewarming now," Dr. Burke says, mid-procedure.

"Please hand me the bipolar forceps, thanks," Dr. Shephard replies, calm as ever.

"We need to rewarm now, Shephard!" Burke repeats, his tone sharper.

"Hang on," Shephard says, eyes glued to the endoscope as he works. "I can't get behind the aneurysm yet. If I can just reach the back..."

"I'm rewarming now!" Burke snaps, his voice rising to show he's not budging.

If they miss the window, delayed rewarming could mean Joe's heart won't restart—no matter how perfectly Shephard clips that aneurysm. This is the thoracic surgery expert, who rules the heart, laying down the law to the neurosurgery guy, who reigns over the brain.

"Done," Shephard finally says after a tense two-second pause, finishing the aneurysm fix.

"You sure?" Burke shoots him a look.

"I'm always sure," Shephard says with a smug edge. "My part's handled. Over to you, Chief!"

"Heh," Burke chuckles, catching the dig at his interim surgical chief gig.

Interim or not, it's still the top spot. Scoring a point against a rival in the race for permanent chief? That's a rush no "indescribable thrill" can touch. He made the right call sticking with this game.

"Alright, folks, let's grab Joe before he checks in with the Big Guy upstairs. Start rewarming!"

"Release the clamps!"

"Turn on the pump—reinfuse the blood!"

"Monitor cerebral perfusion pressure!"

"Keep arterial BP above 60!"

Burke rattles off orders like a drill sergeant, and the OR crew jumps into action, smooth and steady.

Up in the observation seats, Adam watches with a cool, detached gaze.

Steven Murphy hasn't slipped up once. Not that Adam's surprised. In a surgery like this, interns are just glorified assistants. If you're sharp, you get a little more to do. If you're green, you hang back and look busy. Unless some soap-opera-level drama hits, there's no room for screwups.

If every case turned into a theatrical mess, teaching hospitals would've shut down ages ago.

There'd been rumors about that once—"Avoid hospitals in summer and fall!" Fresh med school grads flood in, and supposedly, rookie mistakes spike the death rates. Total myth, though. Debunked hard.

Interns who aren't up to snuff just fetch tools and watch. Only when an attending trusts your skills—and knows you won't tank their rep—do they let you touch anything. Even then, it's with a tight leash.

Steven Murphy paid his way into this OR. Shephard and Burke might not say it out loud, but they're not thrilled. In a life-or-death zone like this, skill's the only badge that matters. So, they've barely tossed him a single task. Learning opportunity? Barely a scratch above zero.

Steven knows it too. A few hundred grand down the drain? He doesn't care. This is just his way of sending Adam a message.

The surgery wraps up without a hitch.

Steven steps out of the OR, flashing his polished gentleman's smile—until he rounds a corner, stumbles back a step, and nearly drops the act.

"Adam, you..."

"Steven, congrats," Adam says, leaning against the wall and holding out a hand.

Steven freezes, torn. He knows about Adam's freakish strength—the guy once hoisted a massive tumor for fourteen hours straight without breaking a sweat. Word spread like wildfire through the hospital; people still bring it up in awe.

And now, after Steven just stepped on Adam's toes, here's Adam, offering a handshake. Steven's half-convinced Adam's about to crush his hand into dust.

"Relax," Adam says, switching from a handshake to a pat on Steven's stiff shoulder. "We're classmates and colleagues. I'm not gonna hurt you."

"Hurt..." Steven forces a grin. "You wouldn't dare, right?"

"Heh," Adam chuckles. "We should catch up properly. Work's still on now, but how about dinner after? Let's grab a bite."

"..."

Steven's never been the tough-guy type—just a proud, prickly rich kid. Against Adam's quiet confidence, he's always felt a little shaky. Now, he's standing there, blanking on any excuse to wiggle out.

Ring-ring!

Saved by the bell—his phone goes off. Steven pulls it out, lights up with relief, and answers. After a quick chat, he waves the phone at Adam. "Sorry, man, my parents want me home tonight."

"No worries," Adam says with a knowing smirk. "Didn't Mr. and Mrs. Murphy mention? I'm the one who set up this dinner."

He gives Steven's shoulder another pat, then strolls off with a grin.

Steven's jaw drops.

What the hell?

You called my parents?!

Dazed, he stumbles back to their clinic and immediately unloads on Alice, his go-to confidante.

"Alice, what's his deal?"

"Uh..." Alice stifles a laugh, choosing her words. "Maybe he's got something to say to your dad."

"Isn't that just tattling to my folks?!" Steven fumes. "And what's he thinking? Why would my parents take his side?"

"Well..." Alice treads lightly. "Maybe he figures he's on the same level as your dad..."

"What?!" Steven blinks.

"Not in medicine," she clarifies fast. "In the rich-guy world. I mean, he's the youngest self-made billionaire out there. He's got the clout to talk to your dad mano-a-mano."

"..."

Steven's stunned again, muttering, "Okay, but why?"

Alice wrinkles her brow. Steven's her trusty backup—great family, smart, capable. Just... a little soft around the edges. Not surprising, though. As the only heir to Murphy Pharma, his mom coddled him growing up. Even now, he can be clueless about how the world works.

Why's Adam going straight to Peter Murphy? Simple: he doesn't see Steven as an equal worth negotiating with. Why waste time bickering with the kid when he can tackle the source of Steven's swagger—his dad?

Convince Peter, and Steven's got no leg to stand on in this rivalry. How Adam plans to pull that off, though? Alice can't quite figure it.

Money-wise, Adam's billions don't stack up to the Murphy family's tens of billions. Status? Adam's just a flashy arts-world name—too flaky. Meanwhile, Murphy Pharma's network, built over years, is a juggernaut Adam can't touch.

Chapter 397: The Murphy Family Dinner

New York – The Murphy Mansion

The dinner Adam had set up completely threw Steven Murphy off his game.

So much so that he clocked out early and headed home.

His father, Peter Murphy, wasn't back yet.

It was just his mom at the house.

Steven spilled the whole story.

"Oh, I see," Mrs. Murphy said with a smile. "You did it for the patient's sake, right? A couple hundred grand's no big deal. As long as you're happy and learning something, I don't see the problem."

"Mom, then why do you think Adam set up this dinner?" Steven asked, puzzled.

"Maybe he's trying to play nice with you," she replied breezily. "Don't worry about what's going on in his head."

"Yeah!"

Steven perked up, soaking in his mom's confidence.

Exactly!

Who cares what Adam thinks? It's about what he thinks!

With his doubts melting away, mama's boy Steven and his mother started chatting about funny hospital stories, laughing and bonding like old times.

"Sir's back," the maid announced after a call from the lobby downstairs. She told Mrs. Murphy, then headed to the door and opened it.

The private elevator dinged.

Pharma titan Peter Murphy stepped out, his face a mask of cool indifference.

"Dad!"

Steven jumped up to greet him.

Mrs. Murphy stepped forward, taking her husband's briefcase and helping him out of his coat.

"Hm."

Peter sized up his son with a glance and gave a slight nod. "This Adam Duncan—he's your classmate, right? You two were never tight. Why's he inviting us to dinner now?"

"Uh..."

Under his father's piercing stare, all the bold CEO vibes Steven had picked up from his mom vanished.

Because his dad? He was the real deal. Steven? Not even close.

"Here's the thing..." Mrs. Murphy jumped in, brushing it off with a casual recap.

"That's reckless!" Peter snapped, his brow furrowing. "You're a doctor, Steven. Your job is to quietly sharpen your skills, impress your superiors with your talent, earn their respect, and get more surgeries. That's how you grow—it's a virtuous cycle. You don't buy your way into an OR!"

"Honey, what's the big deal?" Mrs. Murphy tried to smooth it over. "It's just one surgery. A few hundred thousand. Steven said it's cutting-edge—great learning experience."

"What do you know about it?" Peter shot back. "This isn't about the money! Adam Duncan's a billionaire too—the youngest one out there. You ever see him throwing cash around like that? No! Even when Steven snatched his surgery right in front of everyone, he didn't flash his wallet to take it back!"

"That's because he knows he can't outspend Steven," Mrs. Murphy countered.

"Steven's money?" Peter's gaze sharpened as his usually gentle wife went full mama bear. "What money does he have? That's my money! And without my say-so, no one's touching it."

Mrs. Murphy clammed up.

Steven dropped his head, quiet as a quail.

Peter's expression softened a bit as he sighed. "Adam Duncan's fortune might not match mine, but he built it from scratch in the arts. His liquid cash might even top mine.

A creative kid like that, striking it rich so young—he should be the cockiest guy in the room. If something like this happened, he wouldn't hesitate to throw down, whether it's against you or even me.

But has he?

No!

Not only did he not get mad or flex his wealth over the surgery, he reached out to us, trying to smooth over any bad blood.

That's maturity!

Steven, you and him are classmates and colleagues.

You're both loaded—you didn't need to grind through med school or put up with all that crap.

But you both did.

Why? Because you're cut from the same cloth. You should've been best friends—the perfect pair to be best friends.

I told you this back when you started med school.

But you didn't listen.

Fine! If you can't be best buds, at least don't clash—just be regular classmates.

But what are you doing now, Steven?

You're stealing his surgery, picking a fight. For what?

You short on cutting-edge cases? If you really want them, I can ship you somewhere tomorrow where you'll get groundbreaking surgeries every day!

You up for that?"

Steven's head sank lower, regret creeping in.

"Peter," Mrs. Murphy said softly, unable to watch her son squirm.

"Ugh."

Peter shook his head at his son's meekness. "Fine, forget the best friends thing. Let's talk about buying surgeries. Even if it wasn't Adam Duncan's case, you still shouldn't have done it."

"Why not?" Mrs. Murphy asked, confused.

Steven peeked up at his dad too.

"Because it's not just about the money," Peter said gravely. "If this gets out, Steven's a target. Every patient he operates on will demand he foot the bill. Then what?"

Sure, we can afford it.

But what's the point of being a doctor who only gets cases by paying for them? And if some fearless crook comes along to scam us, we might not plug that hole. Worst of all, how do we keep Steven safe?

Didn't the med center just have a shooting a few days ago?

I'll tell you this: the med center's tame compared to the rest of the country. Hospital shootings happen way too often across the U.S.

If Steven's wealth gets exposed and every schemer's got their eyes on him, how dangerous would that be?"

"Oh!" Mrs. Murphy gasped, startled. "That's terrifying! Maybe, Steven, you should quit medicine and come home to learn the family business with your dad."

"Steven, what do you think?" Peter asked, turning to his son.

"I still want to be a doctor," Steven said, his face pale but resolute.

Like his dad said, he had everything—yet he'd busted his ass through med school because he loved it.

"Fine. But you've got to keep a low profile. No more buying surgeries," Peter warned. "And tonight, you're apologizing to Adam Duncan—sincerely!"

Trust me, he's already thought all this through. He hasn't spread some 'free healthcare courtesy of Murphy' rumor because he's in the same boat as you—rich and a doctor by choice.

Unless you push him too far, he's not about to do something dumb that screws you both.

But if you keep poking him, do you really think a guy who made it big so young is gonna keep taking it?"

"Steven, listen to your dad," Mrs. Murphy said, her tune completely flipped.

"Yeah," Steven mumbled. What else could he say?

Nightfall

When Adam arrived, he didn't even get a chance to drop a subtle threat before Peter laid out his whole thought process. Adam couldn't help but admire how Peter had built his empire from nothing—success like that wasn't random.

He accepted Steven's apology.

Better to bury the hatchet than keep a grudge.

Especially since the other side's firepower outclassed his.

Still, Adam was curious—what flipped Steven Murphy so fast?

"No big reason," Steven said, eyes down. "You're just getting bigger at the hospital, and the gap between us keeps growing. I didn't want to fall too far behind."

"Heh." Adam chuckled.

After Dinner

Back at his apartment, Adam dialed a number.

As someone said: Own your mistakes, and take your lumps standing tall!

Steven had owned up.

But he hadn't taken his lumps yet.

How could this be over...?

Chapter 398: Totally Pissed Off!

Duncan's Fancy Apartment.

A phone call goes out.

Before long, someone shows up. Who else but Alice?

The two dive right into a warm, friendly chat.

Things are rolling along nicely when Adam suddenly shifts gears. "So, were you the one egging Steven on to steal my surgery?"

Alice shakes her head like a rattle. "Nope."

"Really?" Adam smirks, unconvinced.

Alice stiffens, then lets out a quiet sigh. "Okay, fine—what if I did? If I hadn't, would you even remember I exist? Tell me, how long's it been since you last reached out?"

"..."

Adam's got a mouthful of comeback stuck in his throat, but it won't come out.

Holy crap!

So that's the real story!

Even if he'd suspected Alice was stirring the pot, he figured she was just playing both sides for some extra perks. Never in a million years did he think it was just her sulking in silence, too proud to say it outright, resorting to this roundabout way to drop a hint.

"Ha!" Alice bursts out laughing at the dumbfounded look on Adam's face.

You forgot about me, huh? Two whole months without a peep! Well, I sicced my trusty backup on you. You can't touch him—so what're you gonna do about me? Mad? Don't bottle it up—let it out!

She knows how guys tick all too well.

Honestly, even if Adam hadn't pieced it together, she'd have dropped some breadcrumbs later—half-hidden clues to lead him straight to the "mastermind" behind it all.

"No more next time!" Adam says, too drained to argue, settling for a stern warning instead.

"Mm-hmm," Alice replies, all sweet and docile now.

This kind of stunt always risked pissing Adam off for real. She wouldn't have pulled it if she weren't genuinely fed up. All she wanted was to stay on his radar. One go was enough—now she's pretty sure he won't ghost her for months again.

"You owe me a cutting-edge surgery," Adam adds.

"I'll make it up to you!" Alice purrs, batting her lashes.

The Next Day. Early Morning. Medical Center.

Adam and Steven Murphy's cars pull into the hospital lot one after the other.

After hopping out, Adam nods with a smile. "Morning, Steven."

"Morning, Adam," Steven replies, caught off guard but nodding back.

It's not the greeting that throws him. Last night, his dad laid into him, making it crystal clear he'd messed up. He'd already apologized to Adam, and Adam took it with class—something Steven respects. A hello like this? No big deal.

What does weird him out is how genuinely happy Adam seems, like he's not holding the slightest grudge. It leaves Steven with an odd vibe he can't shake.

At the Clinic.

"Alice isn't here yet?" Steven asks one of their team docs.

"Haven't seen her."

"I think she swapped shifts," come the replies.

That's odd—why didn't she tell him? Steven dials her up. When he hears the subtext about "Aunt Flo showing up early," it clicks. He switches gears into full-on caring mode, asking how she's holding up. A few sweet words from Alice later, and he's grinning like a kid.

Locker Room.

"Adam, what's got you so chipper?" George asks, voicing what everyone's thinking.

"Nothing much," Adam says, in high spirits. "Cat eats fish, dog eats meat, Ultraman fights monsters—does happy need a reason?"

"Ultraman?" George and the others exchange blank looks. "What's that?"

"Some superhero from island-nation culture," Adam teases. "You guys should check it out. Sometimes that stuff's actually pretty handy."

He leaves them scratching their heads and heads out of the locker room.

Green Clinic.

"Adam, how'd last night's dinner go?" Bianca asks, genuinely curious.

She'd heard about the surgery-snatching fiasco yesterday and wanted to swing by to cheer him up. But Adam brushed her off, citing his dinner with the Murphy family to hash things out.

"All sorted," Adam says with a grin. "Mr. and Mrs. Murphy are reasonable folks. They made Steven apologize, and we won't have a repeat of yesterday."

"Steven Murphy apologized to you?" Bald Chris blurts out, shocked.

"Why wouldn't he?" Bianca snaps, glaring at Chris. "That still surgery yesterday was Adam's to begin with."

"No, no, it totally was! I'm Team Adam all the way," Chris says, throwing up his hands. "I'm just surprised—Steven's the Murphy Pharma prince. I'd never back down if it were me."

"If it were you, he wouldn't have to apologize," Bianca scoffs. "Sure, Murphy Pharma's a big deal, but don't forget Adam's the youngest billionaire around. Peter Murphy couldn't hold a candle to Adam at his age."

"Duh!" Chris smacks his forehead. "Right! I keep forgetting Adam's not just the best intern—he's a freaking billionaire too."

"Alright, we're all colleagues here, working to learn medicine. No grudge worth holding onto. Let's keep the peace," Adam says, wrapping up the chat.

Steven's apology's already making the rounds, and that's enough—face saved, respect earned. What more does he need?

Yup, he's the one who let the word slip. In a field like medicine, where authority and skill are everything, you've got to protect your rep. Getting your surgery jacked like that in front of everyone? If you don't push back, people notice.

How colleagues see you trickles down to patients. If you're a patient, how much faith are you gonna put in a doc who's the butt of everyone's whispers?

Adam played it right. The buzz spreads like wildfire through the hospital, and with Bianca and his fan club of female docs and nurses hyping it up, his cred's not just intact—it's soaring.

Not buying it? Go chat up Peter Murphy, the Murphy Pharma legend, and get his kid to say sorry. Oh wait—you can't even get a meeting with the guy! So quit griping!

"What's going on here?" Adam stares, baffled, at two figures in real-life CS camo gear—one kid, one young guy—sporting paintball guns. The smaller one's helping the bigger one hobble in.

"Doc, my chest's tight—hurts like hell—agh!!!" The older guy clutches his chest, gasping, before letting out a full-on scream.

Adam rushes over, easing him onto his side and pressing a stethoscope to his chest.

"Get him on oxygen! Order an X-ray and CT, stat!" Adam barks.

A nurse swoops in with an oxygen mask for the guy.

"Wahhhh! It's all my fault!" the little kid sobs. "Cousin, I'm sorry—I shouldn't have beaten you fifty-eight times in a row!"

"AGH!!!" The guy's scream ramps up.

Adam's lip twitches.

Yup, no doubt about it—spontaneous pneumothorax.

"Kid, zip it," Adam says, turning to the boy, who's probably just in elementary school. "The more you talk, the worse he's gonna feel."

"Why?" the kid sniffles, eyes brimming.

"Because your cousin's about to explode from rage," Adam says, half-laughing, half-wincing.

A college guy getting trashed fifty-eight times straight by his grade-school cousin in a game? That's a special kind of pain.

"Sorry, Cousin! I didn't know you sucked so bad. Next time, I'll let you win!" the kid says, wiping tears.

"AGH!!!" Another scream rips out of the guy.

Adam: "..."

Chapter 399: Men Should Be a Little Selfish

Medical Center – Emergency Room

Adam glanced at his little cousin, pretty sure the kid didn't mean any harm, and said, "Mary, take him over there to sit for a bit."

"Yes, Doctor."

Nurse Mary quickly grabbed the kid's hand and led him away.

If she didn't, his older cousin might've actually blown a gasket thanks to the little guy's blunt honesty.

By the time the X-rays and CT scans were done, the young man's parents had rushed in.

"Doctor, how's Pride doing?" they asked, voices tight with worry.

"Spontaneous pneumothorax," Adam explained, sliding the X-ray and CT films onto the lightbox. He pointed at them. "Here's the lung. Next to it's a ruptured bulla—basically a weak spot that burst. That's what's causing his chest pain, tightness, and trouble breathing."

"What do we do now?" the father pressed.

"The trapped air's over 20% of his chest cavity volume—it's a closed pneumothorax, so it won't clear up on its own. We need to do a thoracentesis, drain the air, relieve the pressure on his lung and mediastinum, and help the lung re-expand to normal," Adam said.

"Then do it, quick!" the mother urged.

"Alright."

Adam nodded and started prepping for the procedure.

"Doctor, why'd this happen?" the father asked, unable to hold back.

"A bulla's like a bubble on an old car tire—push it too hard, and it pops," Adam said casually while working on the thoracentesis. "The lungs are key for breathing. When you're angry, excited, or stressed, your mind gets wound up.

Your brain tries to calm things down, but it pumps out adrenaline instead, ramping up the tension even more. It's a vicious cycle. Once it hits a breaking point, boom—the bulla ruptures."

After the procedure, Pride's symptoms eased up fast.

Adam told his parents to step out and let him rest.

Otherwise, if they got into the whole story, the kid might spiral again and set himself off.

Hallway

"I told Pride to take his little cousin out to have fun. What the heck were they doing to get this worked up?" the mother griped.

"It wasn't excitement," Adam corrected. "It was anger."

"Anger?"

The parents blinked, totally thrown. "How's that possible?"

Adam laid it out for them.

They exchanged a look, dumbfounded.

That's it?

They'd just heard from Adam that a ruptured bulla could get serious—heart issues, brain bleeds, sudden death risks.

And all this over losing a game to his little cousin?

They couldn't wrap their heads around it.

"It's rare, but it makes sense," Adam said. "Pride took his cousin out to play, probably wanting to show off. But the kid's a gaming prodigy. After Pride lost a few rounds, he couldn't handle the embarrassment.

He kept dragging the kid back for more, desperate to win at least once. Too bad the little guy's a genius at it—Pride couldn't beat him. Fifty-eight straight losses later, he hit his limit and blew up."

Getting owned by a grade-schooler after trying to flex isn't that uncommon.

Kids these days have a knack for games.

Grown-ups getting smoked by a squad of tweens happens all the time.

Like in the original timeline—Barney and Robin teaming up for laser tag, only to lose and curse out loud: "Damn it, we lost again! Those little punks!"

Or in *The Big Bang Theory*, Sheldon's gaming crew—online or IRL—getting absolutely wrecked by a pack of kids, leaving even smug Sheldon wondering if he's just too old for this.

Kids are that scary!

"Doctor, could this happen again?" the parents asked, worried.

"He'll need to watch it—no big emotional swings," Adam advised.

Nurse's Station

"People these days, huh? Anything's possible," Susan said with a sigh.

"Just wait—there'll be more like this," Adam replied with a grin.

"Clinic Room 3," Susan said, handing him a chart. "Check it out. Bet it'll blow your mind."

"Heh." Adam took the chart with a chuckle.

After dealing with a gold-digger scam and a guy who rage-popped his lung over a game in the last two days, what could possibly surprise him now?

He was basically unflappable at this point.

"Don't believe me? Wanna bet?" Susan teased. "Ten bucks?"

"Sure," Adam said, happy to play along.

Every week, this homeless guy named Arthur would pass out drunk on the street and get hauled into the ER. The staff would place bets on his blood alcohol level while he slept it off.

One veteran nurse got so good at it, she could sniff him from a foot away and nail the exact number—spot on every time.

Over the years, betting on weird cases became an ER tradition.

Clinic Room 3

Adam stepped in and immediately wrinkled his nose.

A nasty, fishy stench hit him hard.

A middle-aged guy sat there, eyes darting, looking awkward.

Adam gave him a once-over, his gaze landing on the man's mouth.

"Open your mouth."

"Doc..." The guy hesitated but complied.

Adam's lip twitched.

He looked away, swallowing a sarcastic comment, and asked professionally, "Been, uh, balancing the yin and yang lately?"

The man nodded.

"You're big on... giving, huh?" Adam said tactfully.

"...Yeah."

The guy caught the drift, his face flushing. "Doc, is it bad?"

He'd already Googled it before coming in—based on the symptoms, he had a hunch what was up. So he got it right away.

"It's a bacterial infection," Adam said, shaking his head. "Metronidazole, twice a day for seven days. Keep your tongue clean, no spicy or irritating foods.

Your partner needs to take the same meds and stay clean too."

"We split up!" the man snapped, a little heated. "I'm done giving! Men should just be selfish from now on!"

Adam didn't react.

Stuff like this? Even regular folks talking about it could spark a fight or get shut down fast.

A doctor? Forget it.

You stay professional—cold, detached diagnostician and healer. No personal feelings allowed.

After the diagnosis, he bolted.

Metronidazole's over-the-counter; the guy could grab it at any pharmacy.

Back at the nurse's station, Susan already had her hand out.

Adam pulled out some cash, counted ten bucks, and handed it over.

A bet's a bet!

Chapter 400: Good Guys Don't Live Long

Medical Center. Outside the OR. Hallway.

As Adam strolls over from the ER, he catches a classic scene unfolding.

Meredith and Christina are huddled together, whispering and stealing glances at something nearby.

A little further off, Dr. Shephard and Dr. Burke are locked in their own standoff.

"We've got an organ donor coming in from Weeks Hospital this afternoon. We'll harvest the organs, and we need OR 1 at four," Burke says.

"I've got OR 1 booked then," Shephard counters.

"Your surgery's not critical."

"You can't just cancel mine."

"As surgical chief, I can!"

"Interim chief!"

"Interim or not, I'm the chief! I call the shots now. You took the OR I needed, so your surgery's been rescheduled!"

Burke lays it down, and Shephard glares at him for a long beat before storming off.

That's power for you—me first, always.

Not happy? Tough luck!

Adam's musing again about how the path to becoming a top doc isn't just about skill—it's about clout too—when Christina's bombshell to Meredith hits his ears.

"What the hell?"

Adam's jaw drops.

What are they even talking about? Did those two attendings screw them over so bad they're swearing off men entirely? They're already sizing things up before even hitting the OR?

And seriously, in their eyes, are guys really that petty?

"Christina, you—"

"What're you thinking?" Christina cuts him off, rolling her eyes at Adam's shocked face. "We're talking about Burke and Shephard."

"Oh." Adam blinks.

Okay, that metaphor... uhh... kinda works, actually.

"Men are all trash!" Meredith grumbles.

"Damn right!" Christina agrees, locking eyes with Burke from across the way. She's still bitter—he knocked her up in one shot, nearly killed her, then dumped her for a promotion.

She used to be so cool-headed, but now her hormones are a mess, and she's all over the place. "We don't even need men. What's a motorized prosthetic cost? Way better than those cold-blooded jerks!"

"I'm with you!" Adam flashes a thumbs-up. "Stick to it, and I'll cover all your prosthetics for life—buy as many as you want, I'll foot the bill."

"Pfft!" Meredith spits.

"Dream on," Christina snaps, her 冷静 kicking back in through the hormonal haze. She sees right through him. "You're hoping we ditch them for good so it's easier to snag surgeries from us, huh?"

Meredith catches on too and throws him a massive eye-roll.

Adam just grins, saying nothing.

Beep! Beep! Beep!

Their pagers go off one after another. They exchange a look—something big's up.

Christina glances at hers and bolts for the ER. Meredith's right behind her.

"Take it easy, you two—you just got back on your feet," Adam calls after them, lingering where he stands.

ER.

"Male, 55, car crash victim. Coma scale 3, skull fracture, multiple internal injuries. We've started cardiac protocol—blood's not circulating. We're pushing meds through his nasal tube, but his heart's basically stopped."

The ambulance screeches to a halt at the ER doors.

Adam beats Christina and Meredith there, who stumble in panting behind him. Dr. Bailey's already on scene with George and Izzie, ready to roll.

This crash called for an ambulance, and en route, the paramedics radioed ahead with the basics—straight to the OR, no pit stops. So, no need for ER docs like Susan; surgery's taking over.

Car accidents rarely involve just one or two people. This time, it's a family of three that slammed into another car—four victims total.

Dr. Bailey's rallied her top four interns, and Susan tagged Adam in, knowing he's a surgery hound.

"How long's he been out?" Bailey asks.

"We did CPR for 20 minutes. Firefighters took 20 to cut him out. He's pretty much gone," the paramedic reports.

"No—only a doctor says he's gone, and then he's gone!" Bailey snaps with authority.

She scans the group, landing on Adam. "Duncan, you're on this—save him!"

"Yes, ma'am!" Adam jumps in without hesitation.

Truth is, this isn't a prime case. If the paramedic's right, this guy's a lost cause. Bailey's not doubting their call—she's just upholding that doctor's creed: fight to the last second.

Paramedics might not have med school degrees, but running calls day in, day out? Their gut's often sharper than a doc's.

Bailey had planned to toss this to someone like chubby George O'Malley for routine practice. But when she spotted Adam, she switched gears. Dead horse, live horse—give it a shot.

If a miracle's gonna happen, Bailey's betting on Adam, not her usual crew. Yesterday, she called him the best intern in front of everyone—no fluff, straight from the gut.

"I've got it!" Adam says, taking over CPR from the paramedic.

"Alright," the paramedic steps aside, helping push the gurney inside, exhaling hard.

Nonstop compressions? It's skill and stamina. This gig's no joke.

As he catches his breath, he can't help but vent about the crash.

"Poor guy. Driving along, minding his own business, passes a car like normal. Then the nutjob behind him starts chasing him down—swerving like a maniac, hell-bent on catching up.

Get this: the psycho wasn't even drunk—just pissed off. He was yelling at his wife on the phone, saw someone pass him, lost it, and floored it.

Ended up ramming the guy—both crashed. The jerk's just knocked out, but this dude? He's toast."

"He's not dead yet," Adam says, still pressing on the guy's chest. "Longest record for this kind of state is four hours—and they brought him back."

At first, Adam was just going through the motions, treating it like a long shot. But hearing this was another innocent victim? That hit him different.

This is the fourth innocent near-death case he's seen in two months. The first two, he didn't get a chance to help. The third—a gunshot wound like a cannon blast—too far gone, dead despite his efforts.

Now, this fourth one's already got a death sentence from the paramedics. Adam's not having it. He's all in—won't quit until the very end.

They say, "Good guys don't live long; bastards stick around forever."

That's bullshit!

"Push 3 mg of epinephrine!"

"Intubate through the trachea!"

"One dose of atropine!"

The nurses snap to it.

"Doc, want to set up the CPR machine?" one asks.

She'd overheard Adam's four-hour survival stat and figures he's in for a marathon—worried he'll burn out doing it by hand.

"No need," Adam says, eyes flicking between the monitor and his rhythm.

In a moment like this, he trusts his own hands over any machine.

A few hours? He can handle it.