

TV Show 461

Chapter 461: The Kid's Got Potential

Medical Center. Emergency Room

"Dr. Lewis!"

"Adam, you're here!"

Susan flashed Adam a warm smile.

"Anything I can help with?"

As he spoke, Adam casually picked up Mr. Lark's chart. The name read: Gator Lark.

Hmm, definitely not Earl, he thought.

"What are you staring at?" Mr. Lark snapped, shooting Adam a sideways glare.

Adam paused, caught off guard by the guy's sharpness, then chuckled. "Do you know Earl?"

"Do you know Dick?" Mr. Lark fired back, his tone dripping with defiance.

"Dr. Lewis, I'll check over there," Adam said, brushing him off. He nodded at Susan and walked away.

"Why'd you stop talking?" Mr. Lark shouted after him. "All us Black folks look the same to you, huh? Well, you white folks all look the same to us too! Bunch of—"

"Enough," Susan cut in, frowning. "Mr. Lark, quiet down."

"Go piss off!" Mr. Lark barked, lashing out at anyone within earshot.

"For someone with no kidneys, that's a pretty ironic thing to say," a nearby nurse muttered with a smirk.

"You got a thing for that pretty-boy doctor? Already defending him?" Mr. Lark turned his venom on the nurse.

"Dr. Lewis, there's a patient over there who needs you," the nurse said, giving Susan a look that screamed get me out of this.

"Mr. Lark, can you calm down?" Susan asked, her brow creasing.

"What, I don't even have the right to speak now?" Mr. Lark sneered, his voice mocking.

"You do," Susan replied firmly. "But this is a hospital. You're disrupting our ability to treat patients. You're in end-stage renal failure and blacklisted from multiple hospitals. We'll help you, but only if you pipe down. Otherwise, security's escorting you out."

"You're all a bunch of—" Mr. Lark grumbled under his breath but finally shut up.

He was a real piece of work, but even he wasn't dumb enough to push it too far. Before landing here, a dozen hospitals had already turned him away. If it weren't for Susan's kindness, he'd be out of luck—especially after getting blacklisted for insulting medical staff. With end-stage renal failure, he could keel over any day without treatment.

"Get him ready for dialysis. I'll grab the portable machine," Susan told the nurse before heading off.

Nurses' Station

"Adam, you okay?" Susan asked, her voice laced with concern.

"I'm fine," Adam said with a grin. "I've dealt with guys like him before. But Dr. Lewis, here's the thing: pitiful people usually dig their own graves. Don't get too attached, or you'll be the one who burns out."

He genuinely didn't care. If a dog barks at you, do you bark back? No way was he letting this jerk tarnish his spotless record. That said, if Mr. Lark crossed the line, Adam had the cash and clout to make him regret it.

Susan sighed. "But we're doctors, Adam. We have to help everyone, even if they're difficult."

She knew why Adam felt that way. Not long ago, she'd taken pity on a homeless guy. After treating him, she slipped him ten bucks for food. His grateful look had warmed her heart. But the next day, he showed up again, asking for a hundred dollars "for an emergency." When she said no, he dropped it to fifty, then twenty.

You can help in a pinch, but not with endless problems, she'd realized. The guy flipped out, cussing her out and nearly getting physical before security hauled him off. It was a mess. For someone as big-hearted as Susan, it hit hard. She'd been down for a while but still couldn't shake her drive to help—even total jerks.

"Dr. Duncan!" a nurse called from across the room.

"What's up?"

Adam shot Susan a quick smile and jogged over to the paramedics rolling in.

"42-year-old female, car lost control and hit a bridge. Conscious, oriented, vital signs stable," the paramedic rattled off.

Adam nodded, took over, and started checking the patient. Then his mouth twitched. Wait, is this a woman? Dressed in women's clothes, makeup flawless—but Adam wasn't buying it. He bit back a comment and focused. No internal injuries, just some scrapes. He glanced at the nurses' station and had an idea.

"Miss Carlton, hang tight," he said, then strolled over.

"What's up, Carter?"

"Dr. Duncan!" John Carter sprang up, waving a pig's trotter like a trophy. "I'm practicing sutures on this pig's foot! The texture's so close to human skin—perfect for training. I've got six more in my fridge at home..."

"Nice," Adam said with a grin. "Pig's feet are great for practice. Want to try the real thing?"

"Absolutely!" John nodded like an eager puppy.

"Over there, Miss Carlton needs stitches. You're on," Adam said, pointing. "You good?"

"No problem!" John chirped.

"If you hit a snag, have a nurse page me," Adam said, clapping him on the shoulder.

John strutted off, buzzing with energy.

"Dr. Duncan, you think he's ready?" a nurse asked, eyebrow raised.

"Why not?" Adam shrugged with a smile. Ambitious, sharp, and practicing on pig's feet—with six more stashed at home? Adam half-wondered if John secretly liked eating them too. That's a lot of trotters to waste otherwise. If the kid wanted to tag along, Adam was happy to give him a shot. Maybe I'll score some fancy braised pig's feet out of it. Could be a fun perk of the job!

"Who are you?" the patient asked, frowning. "Where's Dr. Duncan?"

"Hi, I'm John Carter," he said with a beaming smile. "Dr. Duncan's tied up with other patients, so he asked me to handle your sutures. Miss Carlton, ready to get started?"

The patient looked bummed, rolled onto their side, and said nothing. John took it as a green light and checked the wounds, prepping to stitch. Then he froze. Makeup's great, but up close under a doctor's eye? No hiding the truth. His face scrunched up. Some of the cuts were in awkward spots... but this was his first gig from Adam. No matter how tricky, he'd power through.

Nurses' Station

"Pfft!" The nurses caught John's weird suturing stance and realized the wounds were lower down. His awkward grimace sent them into giggles.

Adam laughed too. "The kid's got potential."

Chapter 462: The Saintly Mother Also Has a Maidenly Aspect

Medical Center

Emergency Room

Woo-woo-woo!

The piercing wail of an ambulance siren cut through the air again. Adam bolted toward it.

"Highway crash—two teenage guys, both wearing seatbelts, thrown from the car. This one had a sudden heart attack, unresponsive, vitals barely there," the paramedic barked out fast.

Adam jumped into action—CPR, the whole resuscitation drill. But the damage was brutal. Brain matter was spilling out, a sickening mess. After injecting atropine and pushing CPR for nearly ten minutes, he stopped.

"Time of death, 7:33," he said, glancing at the clock.

Another car crash victim. Last time, Adam had battled for over an hour and pulled off a miracle. This time? Ten minutes, and he called it. Sure, the injuries were different, but there was more to it. The cop

who came with them said this kid was a street racer—blew a red light on the highway and killed a 22-year-old girl. They got rushed here first, while the innocent victim, her neck snapped, was left at the scene. No shot at making it to the hospital.

Adam was a doctor, not a judge. But for a reckless killer like this? He'd stick to the playbook—no heroics.

"Need help!" Susan's voice rang out from the next room.

Adam shoved the door open. The second guy from the wreck was here now, thrashing in agony.

"Ahh! It hurts so bad!" he screamed, flailing so hard Susan and a nurse couldn't pin him down.

"Adam, help me hold him!" Susan's face lit up when she saw him. Adam's strength was the stuff of legends around here.

"On it." Adam stepped up and pressed the guy down. Instantly, he went still, like he'd been hit with a freeze ray.

"Nice!" Susan grinned ☺, finally able to check him out.

"Prep for peritoneal lavage," she said.

It's a test for internal bleeding—slice a small hole in the belly, pump in saline, and if blood flows out, it's surgery time.

"No need," Adam cut in after a quick look. "He's bleeding internally. OR, now."

"You sure?" Susan blinked.

"Dead sure." Adam nodded.

"Alright then." Susan locked eyes with him and trusted his gut. She might be the ER resident, and Adam just her intern, but everyone knew who the real star was.

"Call the OR—we're on our way," she ordered.

Internal bleeding doesn't mess around; every second counts.

"OMG! Larry's dead!" the guy on the gurney yelled as they rolled him past the room where his buddy lay lifeless.

"Am I gonna die too?!"

"We'll do everything we can to save you," Susan said, her voice steady and warm.

The nurse got on the phone with the OR.

"What? All booked? Can't you squeeze us in? No? This is for Dr. Duncan! OR 5 can bump someone? Perfect, we're heading to OR 5!"

She hung up and dashed to catch Adam's crew. "Dr. Duncan, OR 5!"

Then she sprinted ahead, holding doors open like a pro.

OR 5

"They're all slammed," Susan said, scrubbing in after getting the go-ahead from the attending.

"Looks like it's up to us."

"No sweat—we've got this," Adam said with a grin, scrubbing up next to her.

"You take the lead," Susan said with a little laugh.

She was an ER resident—sure, she could handle surgery, but her deal was stabilizing patients and passing them off to the surgeons. She didn't rack up OR hours like Bailey, the surgical resident. When it was crunch time and everyone else was tied up, she'd step in, but confidence? Not exactly overflowing.

"You sure?" Adam raised an eyebrow.

Doctors—especially residents—lived for surgeries. It's how they sharpened their skills, their ticket to the big leagues.

"I'm sure," Susan said with a smile. "You're the surgeon here, right?"

Adam gave her a look. Classic Susan—Saint Susan—always putting the patient over her own growth. In her mind, with a sharper surgeon like Adam in the room, it only made sense for him to cut. If it were Christina? She'd dive in headfirst and only hand it over if she crashed and burned. That's the God complex of a hardcore surgeon. Susan? No wonder she swapped surgery for the ER.

"Alright," Adam agreed.

Everything was ready. Adam took his spot at the table, nodded to Susan across from him, and held out his hand. "Scalpel."

The scrub nurse slapped it into his palm. With calm, steady hands, he made the incision.

"Everyone says you're a theory genius, but I think you're even better with a blade," Susan said, watching his slick moves.

"For now, theory's still my thing," Adam said, playing it humble.

The surgery went smooth as butter. Afterward, Susan bolted—her cranky dialysis patient was waiting.

Nurses' Station

Adam strolled up and heard the dialysis guy—let's call him Mr. Rant—already going off.

"Who told you to do that?!" he snapped.

"I already lined up a doctor for you," Susan said, her patience fraying.

"Dr. Lewis pulled strings to get the clinic to take him back, and he's being a total jerk."

"He even cussed out Dr. Duncan."

"What a creep."

The nurses weren't holding back.

"I'm not going!" Mr. Rant crumpled the appointment slip and chucked it at Susan's face.

"Mr. Rack," Susan said, her voice tight. She took a deep breath. "If you don't go, you'll end up back here, and none of us want that."

"Shut up!" he barked.

"Excuse me?" Susan's jaw dropped.

"Are you deaf?" He jabbed a finger at her. "I said shut up, you nauseating idiot!"

Adam had seen enough. He waved a nurse over to call security.

Susan walked back to the station, her face flashing shock, hurt, then anger. Her kindness had been trashed—again.

"Don't let him get to you," Adam said quietly.

Susan shook her head, her eyes catching a potted sunflower on the desk. A lightbulb went off.

Security showed up, but Susan held up a hand to stop them. Instead, she slapped on a sugary smile and marched back to Mr. Rant.

A few minutes later:

"Good Lord, I'm not a baby," Mr. Rant grumbled. "Can't you just stick it in my mouth?"

"Sorry, hospital rules. I'll be back in ten," Susan said, smirking as she yanked the curtains around his bed wide open.

"Wait, what about my privacy?!" he yelped.

There he was, pants down, bent over for a rectal temp check. The room barely held it together, stifling laughs.

"What's so funny? Never seen a temp taken before?" he growled.

Everyone bit their lips, dying inside. And there, leaning toward the crowd, was that sunflower, beaming like it was in on the joke

Chapter 463: The Spiritual Book Detective

Medical Center. Emergency Room.

A lone sunflower danced in the breeze atop dark soil.

"Heh," Adam let out a soft chuckle.

He glanced at the oblivious Zaun lunatic sprawled out there, then flashed a thumbs-up at Susan, who was barely holding back her laughter as she walked over.

Even a saint can get ticked off sometimes. Even the purest soul can show a playful spark. Susan, pushed to her breaking point and letting a little mischief slip out, felt more real—more human—than ever.

There are two ways to take someone's temperature. Piss off a doctor, though, and they'll make sure you get the most "precise" method. Who told you to be so heartless, so shameless, so downright obnoxious? And cold as ice, to boot?

That thought sparked a memory. In *The Big Bang Theory*, Howard didn't figure out until college that you could use your mouth to take a temperature. Growing up, his mom never gave him that option—didn't even hint it existed. So, when a nurse went to check his temp for the first time at university, he didn't open his mouth. Nope. He just dropped his pants and flopped down.

That mental image? Priceless.

Suddenly, Howard's mom, the lumbering Mrs. Wolowitz, sprang to life in Adam's mind, vivid and dynamic. Gamer brats like him? Time to face your mom's righteous smackdown!

"Dr. Duncan, the mothers of those two kids who were speeding are here," Nurse Carol said, walking up to Adam with a quiet urgency.

"Did you break the news about Larry's death?" Adam asked, his tone steady.

"Yeah," Carol replied, her expression drifting, like she was lost in thought.

"What's wrong?" Adam pressed, his voice softening with concern.

"It's Andy..." Carol hesitated, her words tangled in unease. "Before they wheeled him into surgery, he saw his best friend Larry die. He was terrified—shaking—and blurted out the truth. The car was Larry's, sure, but Andy was the one driving when it all went down."

"Right," Adam nodded. "We all heard him say it."

Then it clicked. His gaze sharpened. "Wait—he's telling people now that Larry was behind the wheel?"

"Mm-hmm," Carol murmured, almost to herself. "He told his mom it was Larry who blew through the red light. Said he begged Larry to stop, but Larry was all, 'I've got this.'"

"You're not gonna tell the cops about this?" Adam asked, eyeing her carefully.

"I don't know if it's my place," Carol said, shaking her head. "People come in here scared out of their minds, thinking they're done for. They spill stuff to us they wouldn't even tell their spouse or a priest. This kid—he laid his soul bare. It feels wrong to pass that on."

"You're not a priest," Adam said, his stare piercing. "He killed an innocent person out there on the street and got his friend killed too. Their souls are watching you just as much."

"...There's still doctor-patient confidentiality," Carol countered, her voice wavering with conflict.

"Alright, drop it. I'll handle it," Adam said, giving her a look before turning to walk away.

"Dr. Duncan, what are you gonna do?" Carol hurried after him, her steps quick. "Are you telling the police?"

"Same as you—nothing," Adam replied, pointing toward a middle-aged woman approaching, her face streaked with tears. "That's probably Larry's mom right there. Go talk to her, calm her down."

Doctor-patient confidentiality doesn't cover murder—that's fair game for the cops. But Adam wasn't about to go there. The whole point of confidentiality is to let patients trust the system, to keep things smooth between doctors and those they treat. Spill too much, and sure, people might nod along and say you followed the rules. But deep down? There's that flicker of resentment. What if they need something kept quiet someday?

Still, doing nothing—letting an innocent victim's death slide while the real killer walks free? That didn't sit right with Adam either. This wasn't a doctor's mess to clean up. Let the people whose job it is deal with it.

After a crash that bad, who was driving should've been obvious. But American cops? Their efficiency was a joke. The Black officer who'd rolled up to the scene and followed them to the hospital somehow didn't even know who'd been behind the wheel. Was he dense, lazy, or just playing dumb? Adam couldn't tell. Didn't matter. He had a way to light a fire under him and get the truth out easy.

"Kate, it's me," Adam said into his phone, stepping outside the hospital building to call a friend on the force.

She was a homicide detective, not traffic, but as a sharp, well-connected woman in the NYPD, she had pull. A quick word through her to nudge the officer in charge to actually do his job, and those glaring clues wouldn't stay buried.

The car was Larry's—a flashy sports car, no less. That alone said his family wasn't hurting for cash. If this blew open, who'd throw their weight around? Hard to say.

"Deal. I'll get you a signed copy before the new book drops," Adam said with a grin, agreeing to Kate's request.

He'd met Kate because she was a die-hard Lord of the Mysteries fan. At a New York signing, she'd sweet-talked her way backstage through the cops handling security and snagged an autograph in person. A good cop with a good heart—and a face to match. Adam figured it couldn't hurt to have a few police buddies. Never know when you might get pulled over and need a lifeline before things go sideways.

They'd swapped numbers. That was it. At least, that's all he could recall...

Phone call done, Adam headed back to the ER.

"Dr. Duncan!" John Carter bounded over, eager as a puppy. "I finished the stitches."

"What'd you use?" Adam asked, raising an eyebrow.

"4-0 absorbable subcutaneous suture," Carter shot back, his eyes practically begging for approval.

"Alright, let's see how you did," Adam said, stifling a laugh. He got it—the kid was like a student fishing for a gold star.

In the ward:

"Where'd he go?" Carter asked, confused.

"That middle-aged transgender patient? Probably hit the women's restroom," a nurse tossed out casually.

"He just got stitched up—he should be resting," Carter grumbled.

"That's it?" Adam turned to him, his tone firm but patient. "He's your patient. You're supposed to know where he is, what's going on with him. Stay on it."

"Yes, Dr. Duncan," Carter said, startled, nodding fast. "I'll find him."

Right then, a flurry of footsteps echoed down the hall.

"What's happening?"

"Someone's on the roof—about to jump!"

Adam didn't hesitate. He bolted for the stairs. Saving a life? That's why he was here.

"Oh my God!" Carter lagged a beat, then it hit him—his patient. Panic flared in his chest as he sprinted after Adam, legs pumping. "Please don't be my patient, please don't be my patient, please don't be my patient!"

When he stumbled onto the roof, breathless, he looked over and froze. Cold sweat beaded on his forehead. Of course it was her. Standing at the edge, arms spread wide like Rose from Titanic, was Ms. Carlton.

If he'd known it'd come to this, he would've acknowledged her as a woman, given her the respect she deserved, instead of brushing her off because of his own dumb biases. If she jumped now, that guilt would haunt him forever.

Chapter 464: I Want You to Remember Me Forever

Medical Center. Rooftop.

"Miss Carlton, please don't do anything rash."

Adam stood on the stone ledge at the building's edge, speaking calmly as he inched closer.

"Don't come any nearer, or I'll jump!"

Middle-aged Carlton, a person of ambiguous gender, turned back and thrust out a hand in warning, stopping Adam in his tracks.

"I know you're hurting, but please don't gamble with your life like this."

Adam was close enough now. In a split second, he calculated the distance in his head and felt confident he could act if needed. But he didn't move just yet. If he could talk Carlton down with some emotional support, he'd rather avoid a dramatic rescue scene. After all, he could save them once, but not a second time. The best outcome would be convincing Carlton to let go of those suicidal thoughts.

"I can't keep pretending to be a woman anymore," Carlton said, glancing back with a pained, bitter smile. "But being a woman is all I've ever wanted."

"Who says you can't be a woman?" Adam countered gently. "This world isn't as hopeless as you think. As long as you're here, there's hope."

"There's no hope left. Everyone looks down on me." Carlton let out a hollow laugh. "Even you doctors and nurses—I'm so tired of those looks."

"That's not true," Adam replied, though inwardly he cursed John Carter for being too young and wearing his emotions on his sleeve, which had clearly worsened Carlton's state. Still, he kept his face steady and smiled. "I've got a best friend whose dad is just like you. Back in the day, he didn't get his dad either. But years later, when he got married, he flew to Las Vegas to have his father at the wedding. In the way his dad wanted—walking down the aisle with him, arm in arm, alongside his mom. I'm not trying to brag, but I had a little something to do with them patching things up. So, no, I don't judge you. A few people's opinions don't speak for everyone."

Carlton couldn't help but look over at him.

"You might've heard of him—Helena, the Las Vegas drag queen," Adam added, borrowing a bit of Chandler's dad's fame for the moment.

"I know her," Carlton said with a faint smile. "She's lucky. She's so beautiful that when she walks out, almost no one can tell. They all think she's a real woman. But how many people can be that gorgeous? Look at me! How could I ever compare to her?" They gestured at their body with a bleak chuckle.

Adam paused, at a loss for words. It's true what they say—people's values often follow their looks. If you're pretty enough, the world bends for you, no matter how twisted things get. Chandler's dad was "beautiful" in the eyes of the world, and that's why he could live so freely. Without that, the constant scorn and disgust would've worn anyone down—depression would've set in, and freedom would've slipped away.

"I used to have a best friend," Carlton said, wiping a tear from the corner of their eye with a sad laugh. "We'd have lunch together, go shopping, hang out. One night, we were drinking, and I opened up to her

about everything. She got up and left. Never spoke to me again. I used to think stuff like that made me stronger, made me more sure of who I was. But now? It takes me three hours to put on makeup just to step outside. I pluck, I shave, I do everything—and still, people can tell. I see it in their eyes, the disgust. And they're right. I'm disgusting."

"I'm so sorry, Miss Carlton," John Carter called out from a distance, his voice thick with guilt and shame. He'd heard this story during the stitching process and had tried so hard not to look at Carlton, terrified his face would betray the very disgust and aversion they were talking about. Because, honestly, he did feel it.

"It's fine," Carlton said with a faint smile. "You're not the first, but I hope you're the last."

John Carter looked like he was about to lose it. From the sound of it, he might've just become the final straw that pushed Carlton to jump.

"Miss Carlton, even if you won't think of yourself, think of others," Adam said, shifting the topic. "There are people down there going about their day. If you jump, it's not just you who might die—some innocent person could get crushed. Is that what you want?"

"That's God's problem," Carlton replied, glancing down below. "If God brought me to this point, then God's responsible for whatever happens next." With that, they spread their arms and tipped backward off the edge—just like Lin Qingxia's iconic cliff-jump as Dongfang Bubai in the movie. Even that smile looked eerily similar.

"Damn it!" Adam had seen it coming. In an instant, he kicked into bullet-time mode, sprinting forward at full speed. As he lunged, his super-genius brain still had time to rant internally: I'm absolutely asking you later if you were cosplaying Dongfang Bubai! It was 1998, after all—Lin Qingxia's Swordsman films had already come out. And with Carlton's lifelong wish to be a woman, Adam had every reason to suspect they'd seen the movie and put themselves in that role.

Just in time, Adam's hand shot out and grabbed one of Carlton's legs midair. When he saw their smile widen, his mouth twitched. "I want you to remember me forever..." Carlton murmured the classic line, then swung their free leg toward Adam in a kick. Without some mystical martial arts power to defy Newton's laws, they couldn't exactly palm-strike him from midair.

"Enough already!" Adam snapped, cutting them off mid-line. With a grunt, he yanked Carlton back by the leg, hauling them onto the rooftop floor. You think you're Dongfang Bubai? Well, don't turn me into Linghu Chong! Carlton hit the ground, their unfinished line hanging in the air, a stunned look on their face. Then a sharp pain shot up from their calf. "Ahh!" they cried out. When Adam had pulled them back, he'd deliberately used extra force, snapping their leg—not just out of frustration at their antics, but also to give them some forced downtime to rethink their life choices.

Adam smirked to himself, but his expression shifted as he noticed something: Carlton was wearing only one high heel. The other one...

Downstairs, Hospital Entrance.

Barney was being wheeled out in a wheelchair. "This is amazing! Look at me—I can finally walk again! Back on the field, back in the game! This is so freaking exciting—it's like a miracle from above! AHHH!!!" He leapt up from the chair, planted his feet on the ground, tightened his tie, and turned to his African-American brother James, who'd come to pick him up. He launched into an ecstatic speech, then grabbed James in a hug, shaking with joy as he roared out his pent-up excitement.

"Chill out, Barney," James laughed.

"AHH! ...Ah..." Barney's triumphant yell cut off abruptly, replaced by a scream of a very different kind. He collapsed in a heap.

James froze, jaw dropping.

It was something from above—but not a miracle. A single high heel had plummeted from the sky and smashed right into Barney, knocking him out cold.

Chapter 465: Braised Pig's Trotters Are the Real Deal

Medical Center. Rooftop. After a Heart-Pounding Moment.

The medical staff, who'd been held back by security to watch the chaos from a distance, rushed forward. They lifted Carlton—whose leg was now sporting a fresh fracture—onto a stretcher.

Yup, you heard that right.

The security guard had gotten there even before Adam and the crew. But did he bother with Carlton, who was sprawled out with his arms wide open like Rose from Titanic? Nope. The guy just stood way off in the distance, keeping order and making sure no one else got close.

Emmm... that's his job, I guess.

Risking his life to save someone? Yeah, not in the job description.

"Ever seen The Invincible East?" Adam couldn't help but ask as they wheeled Carlton away.

"You've seen it too?" Carlton's face lit up, the pain in his leg momentarily forgotten.

Adam's lips twitched into a half-smile, but he didn't reply.

Of course.

This was the golden age of Hong Kong cinema. Big-shot producers back then were all about shipping their films overseas—especially to rake in those sweet American dollars. Martial arts flicks might not have hit the West as hard as kung fu did, but they weren't totally ignored either. With all that high-flying qinggong action, just slap a "magic" label on it, and you're good to go!

For someone like Carlton—already on the fringes of mainstream society—a niche Hong Kong martial arts romance flick about people like him? It was perfect. Beyond just relating to the identity stuff, The Invincible East had it all: beauty, strength, romance, tragic betrayal, and that gut-punch of making the betrayer regret it forever. No wonder it hit Carlton and his crowd right in the feels.

Adam even had a sneaking suspicion: anyone in Carlton's circle who'd seen the movie probably daydreamed about mastering the Sunflower Manual themselves.

"Dr. Duncan, I'm so sorry," John Carter said, shuffling over guiltily once the crowd had cleared.

"Do you know what you did wrong?" Adam asked, eyeing him.

"I shouldn't have been so unprofessional. I pushed her too far," Carter muttered, head down.

"Good that you get it," Adam nodded. "As doctors, our job is to heal and save lives. Nothing else is our business."

"Yes, Dr. Duncan," Carter replied, still looking pretty down in the dumps.

Honestly, who could blame him? No one's cracking jokes after a mess like that.

"Look, it's not all on you," Adam offered after a beat, trying to lighten the mood. "He was in here before, after a car crash. Thinking back, he probably rammed into it himself. And this? It's not about him being a man or a woman—it's about whether he's even human."

Jumping impulsively without knowing the full story? Sure, that's forgivable. But after Adam had warned him it was putting others at risk, he still left it "up to God" and leaped? That's not something a decent person does!

"Anyway, I just checked your work," Adam said, clapping Carter on the shoulder. "The alignment's spot-on, the spacing is perfect, and your stitching? Flawless. All that practice with pig's trotters clearly paid off."

Carter's face brightened instantly, a grin tugging at his lips despite himself.

"So, what do you do with the trotters after you're done stitching?" Adam asked, genuinely curious.

"Cook 'em and eat 'em," Carter said with a laugh. "If there's too much, I give some away."

"Cooking them straight up is such a waste," Adam said with a sly grin. "Braised pig's trotters? Now that's the way to go."

With that, he headed downstairs, leaving Carter beaming. He still had to check if that rogue high heel had hit anyone.

Nurses' Station.

"What?!" Adam's jaw dropped when he heard the high heel did hit someone—and that someone was Barney, who'd been this close to getting discharged. A pang of guilt hit him.

Without his butterfly effect flapping around, Barney's main-character luck would've kept him untouchable—waltzing through life unscathed, poison charms and all. After finally recovering from a broken bone and making it to the hospital doors, ready to leave, he gets clocked by a freaking high heel from the sky? Adam's storm had straight-up flipped Barney's hero vibes upside down.

"Is he okay?" Adam asked, worried.

There'd been that other guy once, someone like Barney, taken out by a random boot from above. And then... well, that was it for him.

The hospital building wasn't that tall, but a high heel? If that sharp stiletto heel stabbed someone's head, it could absolutely be lights out.

"He's fine," the nurse assured him quickly. "It just grazed his head with the flat part. Knocked him out for a bit, but he's awake now."

"I'll go check on him," Adam said, relieved. He nodded at the nurse and hurried off toward Barney's VIP room.

"Who ambushed me?!"

"Jerk!"

"I'm not letting this slide!"

"Ow—ouch!"

The second Adam stepped into the VIP room, Barney's shouts—and yelps of pain—filled the air.

"George, I'll take it from here," Adam said, nodding at the doctor already checking Barney.

George gave a quick nod and left.

"Barney, you should be thanking your lucky stars," Adam said, stepping up to examine him with a grin. "If I hadn't pulled him back in time, you'd have a whole person landing on your head, not just a shoe."

"You again!" Barney completely ignored the part where Adam saved his life, jabbing a finger at him. "I knew it! Every time you're involved, I'm the one who ends up screwed!"

After losing a few bets to Adam, Barney had developed a bit of a mental block about him.

"Sorry, Barney's brain took a hit," a Black guy standing by the bed said, apologizing on Barney's behalf. "Thanks for saving him. I'm James, Barney's brother. You must be Adam, right?"

"No worries, Barney and I are buddies," Adam said with a smile, giving James a nod and sizing him up for a sec.

"I know what you're thinking," Barney cut in, catching Adam's glance. "Barney's white, James is Black—how could we be brothers, right?"

"I wasn't thinking that," Adam said, smirking.

"Oh, come on!" Barney pointed back and forth between himself and James. "We're practically identical, okay? How could we not be brothers?"

"Yep, we're brothers for sure," James chimed in. "Come on, bro, high five!"

"High fives are back in style?" Barney lit up.

"Of course," James said, mimicking Barney's signature tie-straightening move and tone. "I declared it this morning."

Total 'I'm the king of cool' energy.

"Nice!" Barney grinned, slapping James' hand.

"See?" Barney pointed between them again. "You're telling me we're not brothers?"

Adam just chuckled. Yeah, right.

Sure, they grew up together, picked up the same quirks—totally normal. But a purebred white guy and a purebred Black guy calling themselves blood brothers? That's pushing the limits of genetics! Even half-siblings wouldn't come out this white and this Black.

Still, whatever—live your truth, guys!

"Is Barney okay?" James asked, switching gears.

"Yeah, he's lucky. Probably just a mild concussion," Adam said after a thorough check, smiling. "But to be safe, let's get an MRI and keep him here for observation."

"No way!" Barney barked. "I'm done with this place. I'm outta here! New York can't survive without Barney Stinson!"

Chapter 466: Carter's Misadventure in Dihua

Medical Center. VIP Ward.

"Barni, your fracture's healed up nicely, but don't forget that charm poison of yours hasn't fully cleared out yet," Adam said with a nudge. "Maybe hold off on wreaking havoc on the world for a bit, huh?"

"Oh, come on, don't try to fool me," Barni shot back with a smirk. "I've already done my homework. As long as I play it safe, it's no big deal. Half the doctors in this hospital have had it too—what, are they all waiting six months to get back in the game?"

"It's not the same," Adam countered, shaking his head. "You said it yourself: New York can't survive without you, Barni Stinson. All those other guys combined don't spread it like you do. They can get away with it; you can't—unless you're pulling a Joey."

"Joey? What's up with him?" Barni's eyes lit up with curiosity.

"He's turned over a new leaf," Adam said with a grin, spilling the tea about how Joey had toned down his playboy ways to avoid some messy family drama. "So, Barni, what about you?"

"That's, like, a decade away," Barni brushed it off. "I'll deal with it then." He flashed a smug little smile. "Joey Tribbiani? Psh, dude's getting old!"

"Yeah, well, you better hope your luck holds up next time," Adam teased.

"Barni, I think you should listen to Adam," James piped up hesitantly. "He's your buddy and a doctor—he's not out to get you."

"James?!" Barni spun around, staring at his brother-in-arms like he'd grown a second head.

"Don't give me that look," James chuckled. "Your luck's been absolute trash lately. As your bro, if it's between your wild lifestyle and keeping you safe, I'm picking safe every time."

"Good brother," Barni said, lifting his chin proudly before jabbing a finger at Adam. "If you really cared about me, you'd get me out of this hospital ASAP—away from this guy. He's my bad-luck charm. Keep him at a distance, and I'll be free to live my best life, no problem!"

"I'm still right here, you know," Adam drawled, unimpressed.

"Quit talking nonsense," James laughed, waving Barni off. Then he turned to Adam. "Hey, did someone just jump off a building earlier?"

"Yeah," Adam nodded, filling him in on the details.

"That's awful," James said, his face darkening with anger. "Everyone's got the right to live how they want—man, woman, whatever, it's their call. Who's got the nerve to judge or sneer at her? Adam, keep an eye on Barni for me—I'm gonna go check on her."

With that, he grabbed a high-heeled shoe and stormed out of the room, fuming.

"He's...?" Adam raised an eyebrow, piecing it together.

"Yup," Barni grinned. "James is gay. That's why we're the ultimate duo. Ted doesn't even deserve to shine our shoes!"

And then Barni launched into a full-on ramble about their epic brotherly adventures—how they'd team up and take on the world. Like that one time at the bar:

They'd split up to scout the scene. Barni checked out the hot guys; James scoped out the ladies. Then James would swoop in to "harass" a woman Barni had his eye on—say, some chick in low-rise jeans with a tattoo peeking out, sipping a drink at the bar.

"Hey, babe, that's one sexy tattoo," James would say, laying it on thick.

"Get lost, you creep!" she'd snap, swatting him away. Even the most chill girls weren't cool with a guy getting that handsy.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Barni would jump in, pulling James back with a straight face. "Her tattoo's not an invitation for you to grope her—it's about her depth. I bet her inner world's like a dolphin swimming through a field of flowers."

Adam couldn't help but crack up at that line. It was ridiculous—but he knew it worked like a charm on some girls.

Sure enough, paired with Barni's sharp looks and custom-tailored suit, the woman would melt into a smile. Then James would "lose it," and the two would launch into a classic East Coast-style showdown:

"What're you staring at?"

"Staring at you, what about it?"

"Look again, I dare you!"

"Oh, I'm looking!"

"Chill, fine, you win, happy now?"

Barni would puff out his chest, getting right in James' face, while James threw up his hands in mock surrender, shooting Barni a sneaky wink before slinking off "defeated."

That left Barni, the big hero, to play it cool. "Next time he bugs you, just let me know," he'd say, turning to leave while counting in his head: One, two, three...

"Thanks! You should stick around... just in case," she'd call after him, right on cue within three seconds.

Barni would turn back, lock eyes with her, and—bam—mission accomplished. Hero saves the day!

Then they'd switch roles. Barni's assist move was even simpler. James would "collapse" in a crowd of guys, and Barni would yell, "Help! He's not breathing—anyone know CPR?"

James was a good-looking dude, so in a group of guys, some eager beaver would always jump up, eyes gleaming, "I can! I can!" But Barni would bypass the overzealous ones and point straight at the guy James had picked out.

That's how tight these two were. Their crowning achievement? A double date with a pair of siblings—four people, one epic night. If James hadn't been out of town, Ted wouldn't have even gotten a look-in.

Adam listened to Barni's nostalgic bragging while escorting him for an MRI.

Nurse's Station.

"Still thinking about earlier?" a young nurse asked, noticing John Carter lost in thought. "It wasn't your fault, you know."

"Thanks," Carter said, giving her a grateful glance.

"No problem!" she chirped with a sweet smile. "Besides, if it weren't for you, we wouldn't have seen Dr. Duncan's heroic moment—swooping in to catch that jumper mid-air, then pulling off a windmill move to yank them back like it was nothing. So cool, right?!"

Carter's face froze. He shouldn't have said thanks—she wasn't even comforting him; she just wanted to gush about Dr. Duncan!

"Carter, you were there—you've got the best view. Spill the details!" she pressed, grinning.

"Didn't you already hear about it?" he asked, forcing a smile.

"Yeah, but their angle's not the same as yours!" she insisted.

Carter sighed. Adam's first lesson had been clear: Never piss off the nurses. So he recounted the whole thing. She kept cutting in, asking about his feelings—nodding happily when he mentioned being shocked or grateful.

"You're so into Dr. Duncan—you must know a ton about him, huh?" Carter ventured cautiously.

"Totally!" she said, puffing out her chest. "Nobody knows Dr. Duncan better than me."

"So... he asked me about pig knuckles earlier," Carter said. "Said braised ones are the best. What's that about?"

"Oh, that!" She tapped her chin, eyes darting as she snapped her fingers and pointed at him. "I've got it!"

"What's it mean?" Carter asked, leaning in eagerly.

"Can you braise pig knuckles?" she asked, smirking.

"No," he admitted, shaking his head.

"That won't do," she said, waving a hand. "Tonight, you've gotta learn—preferably from a pro."

"Wait—you're saying Dr. Duncan wants to eat my braised pig knuckles?" Carter's jaw dropped.

"Nope!" She wagged a finger. "Dr. Duncan's a billionaire—he's got chefs for that. He's not after some newbie's cooking. You want to learn from him, right? This is your shot! Man, Dr. Duncan's just too nice."

Carter's eyes sparkled as it sank in. "Tonight, I'm finding someone to teach me how to braise pig knuckles!" he muttered to himself.

Chapter 467: The Poor Waste Electricity, the Rich Waste Their Lives

It's noon at the self-serve cafeteria.

"She didn't even know he was married. Then his wife showed up out of nowhere, and bam—he dumped her."

"Look at her, totally zoned out. I heard she's losing it."

"Who's to blame? What did she expect? Hooking up with the attending doc was never gonna end well."

"Dreamy date with Mr. Perfect—look at that hair. Who could top him?"

"Uh, Dr. Duncan's hotter and way more perfect. You're off your game."

"Don't you know they've all got daddy issues?"

"I feel bad for her, though. She's stuck working here with him—and them—while everyone knows everything~"

"Everyone knows everything~"

Adam walks over with his tray and catches his coworkers sneaking glances at Meredith while their gossip buzzes around him.

"So, how you holding up?" he says with a grin, plopping down across from Meredith, who's pretending to flip through a book.

"I'm fine," she replies, her face blank as she spares him a quick glance before burying her nose back in her pages.

The whispers around them might be hushed, but those stares? Totally unfiltered. Some pitying, some mocking—like little needles jabbing at her face. No way she doesn't notice.

But like she told Dr. Bailey when she butted heads with her way back when: she'd handle the consequences herself. Didn't think it'd come true like this, though. Turns out it's not her and him against the world—just her, alone, taking the heat.

Back then, people envied her, hated her guts for it. Now? The gossip's hitting them like a sweet revenge high! Compared to this mess, the grunt work and dirty jobs Bailey used to dump on her feel like a kindness.

"OMG!" Liz storms over, plunks down next to them, and rolls her eyes so hard they might get stuck. "I can't deal with the Shepherds right now."

"What's up?" Adam asks, chuckling.

Meredith's ears perk up so fast you can practically see them twitch.

"So, this couple—friends of the Shepherds—drove in from Boston," Liz says, chomping on her food mid-sentence. "Montgomery's bestie's mom died a month ago from ovarian and breast cancer. She got tested—positive for the mutant gene."

"Positive doesn't mean she's got cancer, though," Adam says, surprised. "She's not thinking surgery already, is she?"

"Yup," Liz groans. "85% odds are high, sure, but she's not taking any chances. Tomorrow's double mastectomy and fake boobs, then the next day—hysterectomy and both ovaries out."

"Whoa," Adam sucks in a breath. "That's hardcore. Her husband's gotta be against it, right?"

"If you were her husband, would you be cool with it?" Liz shoots back.

"..." Adam's mouth twitches.

Yeah, those surgeries wipe out any chance of cancer by yanking the soil it grows in—no mutant gene playground left. But the fallout? Brutal. First, she's sterile—no kids, ever. Second, her skin's aging ten years overnight. Third, her emotions might tank hard, maybe even vanish completely, turning her into Leonard's mom, Beverly-level ice queen. Then there's the silicone implants and their side effects. And that's just the main stuff—random complications could pile on anytime.

Everything that makes her a woman? Gone in a few cuts. How many husbands could handle that?

"She's still got a 15% chance of never getting it," Adam points out. "Even if she does, there's treatment. No need to roll the dice this big."

"That's what her husband's been telling her," Liz says, shaking her head. "But she's dead-set against any risk. Dr. Montgomery's backing her up, Dr. Shepherd's siding with the husband—they're fighting worse than the couple themselves. It's not even their first showdown."

"So what happened?" Meredith finally pipes up.

Back during that train derailment mess, she'd been hungover, hooked to a vitamin drip, and half out of it. Ran into someone she knew and was dying to hear some trash talk about her rival, Dr. Montgomery. Just one "bitch" would've made her day. Everything was lining up in her favor—until Shepherd hit her with, "She's my wife, how could I abandon her?" and crushed her dreams.

Even now, she can't believe she lost. Lost so inexplicably. No way she's okay with it—she's still itching for a comeback. A lover and rival duking it out? That's her kind of drama.

"Montgomery's got me digging through her and her family's full medical history for pre-op," Liz sighs. "Surgery's tomorrow and the day after. Men can get breast cancer too, y'know—there's a gene test for it. But almost no guy bothers, and even if they test positive, none are chopping stuff off preemptively to be 'safe.' This woman's castrating herself. She's naive enough to think her husband loves just her, not her looks or body or anything else. She's gonna regret it, mark my words."

"Her husband's against it, isn't he?" Adam says, shaking his head. "That's a neon sign she's ignoring. If she goes through with it and they divorce, it's not all on him."

If she had ovarian or breast cancer and needed those parts removed, asking her husband to stand by her would make sense. But this? Just a chance? That's a whole different story.

Love's all hormones. Cut those out, and love's DOA. Sure, friendship and family vibes can keep life happy without it—but steamrolling her husband's feelings and clear objections? That's a one-way ticket to tanking even those. How's that supposed to last?

"Montgomery's snapping pics of her bestie with a camera," Liz shrugs. "Y'know, for after tomorrow's surgery... Says it's a Christmas gift for the husband, so he'll 'always remember.'"

"..." Adam's mouth twitches again.

There's that saying: the poor waste electricity, the rich waste their lives. Poor folks settle for art pics or movies—cuz they've got no choice. Rich people? Why bother watching when you can live it?

"So, you're not on her side?" Adam asks Liz.

"Nope," Liz nods firmly. "She's being an idiot. Once she cools off down the road, she'll be miserable. She even tried convincing me to back her up, but I can't."

"It's cool," Adam says, patting her shoulder. "Don't force it. Be you. If you're too worked up to handle it, I can step in."

"..." Liz stares at him, jaw dropped.

"What?" Adam says, all earnest. "Those surgeries are tricky and huge. If you can't give 100%, I'll cover for you. It's all for the patient, right?"

Liz chucks her drink onto her tray, flips him double middle fingers, and storms off with her food. She's never met someone so shameless.

Chapter 468: The Treasure Girl Who Cried Her Eyes Out

Night had fallen.

When word got around that Barney had been knocked out cold by a high-heeled shoe, Matthew and the gang all swung by to check on him.

"I'm fine, guys! I could check out right now. Tonight, we're drinking 'til we drop!" Barney declared from his hospital bed, his energy practically bouncing off the walls as he grinned at his friends.

But everyone's eyes slid over to Adam.

"Looks like he's okay for now," Adam said, glancing at the monitor with a nod.

"See? Told ya!" Barney jutted his chin out, smug as ever.

"But..." Adam's tone shifted, "it's probably best if you stay one more night. Just to be safe."

"No way!" Barney yelled. "I'm done with this dump! I'm outta here—right now! Everyone, let's hit McAllen's Bar, pronto!"

"Sorry, Barney," Ted said with an apologetic shrug. "I've got something to take care of later. How about you stay tonight, and we'll celebrate tomorrow instead?"

"What could possibly be more important than my grand hospital exit party?" Barney demanded, clearly annoyed.

"I've gotta go apologize," Ted said with a wry smile. "At lunch today, one of the office clerks on our project team pulled out this huge lunchbox. I just said, 'Awesome, you got lunch for all of us!'—and she burst into tears and ran off. Then I just found out she quit."

"Dude, that's cold," Matthew piped up.

"Ted Mosby, how could you?!" Lily chimed in, her tone dripping with mock outrage.

"Sounds like this clerk's a 'big girl,' huh?" Adam said with a chuckle.

"Yeah," Ted groaned. "I swear I didn't mean anything by it! That lunchbox was massive—like, it had a whole chicken in there. A legit, giant roasted chicken! Outside of a Thanksgiving family dinner, I've never seen one that big. Put yourselves in my shoes—what would you have thought?"

"Go apologize, man," Adam said, still grinning. "You know Monica, right? What do you all think of her?"

"Gorgeous!"

"Smokin' hot!"

"Super sweet!"

"Absolute perfection!"

Adam's question sparked a flood of responses from the three guys—though some of the answers sounded a little... offbeat. Everyone's heads swiveled toward Lily, whose dreamy expression gave her away.

"Oops, sorry!" Lily snapped out of it as her boyfriend nudged her awake. She wiped the corner of her mouth with an awkward laugh.

They were all old friends—they knew Lily's quirks by now. After a shared chuckle, they let it slide.

"She was a 'big girl' back in middle school too," Adam said, smirking.

"No way!"

"You're kidding!"

The group erupted in disbelief.

"Dead serious," Adam replied, his grin widening. "Picture two Monicas mashed together. The Monica you know now? She's basically half of what she used to be. Every 'big girl' is a treasure, you know.

So, Ted, go give that sincere apology. Who knows? Maybe this 'big girl' you made cry and quit is your soulmate!"

"..." Ted's mouth twitched.

He couldn't even begin to imagine what that clerk would look like "halved." Right now, his brain was stuck on the full version of her—and that kind of "soulmate" felt like way more than he could handle.

"Heh," Adam smirked, reading Ted's mind like an open book. "Of course, if you don't wanna bother, that's fine too. But who's to say? You put in all that effort to help her slim down, she transforms into a total stunner, and then—bam—she thanks you and runs off to chase some rich hunk or a brooding CEO."

"No way!" Ted shot back. "If I stuck by her through all that, there's no way she'd do me like that."

Adam just smiled, saying nothing. Oh, you sweet, naive soul. Clearly, Ted hadn't binged enough melodramatic East Asian soaps. Ever heard of "Diamond Lover"? TV comes from real life, buddy. Stories like that were old news—heartbreak headlines were a dime a dozen.

And that wasn't even the worst of it. Spending your free time and emotions as her personal cheerleader? At least you'd get a workout in too—not a total loss. The real suckers were the guys slaving away at construction jobs to put their girlfriends through college, only to get dumped when the plot took its predictable turn. Those poor souls got the full, brutal smackdown from reality.

"Effort equals reward? That's just a pretty dream," Adam thought.

"Fine, go do your thing, but swing by after," Barney said, his enthusiasm unshaken. "We'll head out first."

"Sorry, Barney," Matthew cut in, looking sheepish. "I'm out too—I've got a paper to finish."

"Come on!" Barney groaned. "You said yourself writing papers is like eating cake—your exact words!"

Oh, and speaking of cake, has some awesome stuff if you're into supporting cool projects!

"Plus," Barney pressed, "we threw, what, a dozen parties back in the day, and you still cranked out a paper in the last few hours that'd take anyone else a full weekend. Request denied! No excuses!"

"That used to be true," Matthew said, wincing. "But this semester's prof? She's the strictest I've ever had. Worse, she just got divorced, and now she's taking it out on us. Papers that should've been A's? She's slapping B's or even B-minuses on 'em. If I pull my old trick—boozing it up and rushing a B-level paper—I'll end up with an F. No thanks."

"Heh," Adam laughed.

He got where Matthew was coming from. Law, like medicine, was a slow grind—every step had to be solid. One F on a paper? Sure, you could retake it, but that stain on your record would stick. For someone just coasting, no biggie. But if you're aiming high, that one blemish amid a sea of perfect resumes could tank you right out of the gate.

If that happened, Matthew's dream of being a New York judge? Toast.

"We're all walking on eggshells," Matthew grumbled. "We've been saying behind her back—she needs a man."

"Oh, really?" Barney's eyes lit up.

"You wouldn't be into her," Matthew said, rolling his eyes. "She's pushing fifty."

"So what?" Barney countered, ready with his signature spin. "You're age-shaming now? Older women don't deserve love?"

"That's not what I meant!" Matthew waved his hands frantically.

"Is she hot?" Barney interrupted.

"I guess?" Matthew shrugged.

"A cougar!" Barney rubbed his chin, then snapped his fingers. "Matthew, I've decided—I'm taking this challenge."

"What challenge? I didn't say anything!" Matthew sputtered.

"Tonight—"

"Nope!" Adam cut in.

"Fine, tomorrow!" Barney adjusted his tie, undeterred. "I'll rest up tonight and work on my 'Cougar Plan.' Tomorrow, Operation Cougar officially kicks off!"

"Please don't," Adam warned. "You're still recovering from that charm overdose. If Matthew's prof finds out, what do you think she'll do to his grade?"

Chapter 469: Emma

Medical Center. VIP Ward.

"No way!"

Matthew let out a panicked yelp after hearing Adam's warning.

"Chill out," Barney said casually, brushing it off. "Adam's just messing with you. I'm totally fine now."

"No, he's not," Adam countered, shaking his head. "It hasn't even been six months yet. We can't be sure you're completely in the clear—there's still a risk of infection."

"I'll take precautions," Barney shot back, smirking. "Trust me, no one knows safety better than I do. I'm not Joey Tribbiani—I'm not looking to end up with a kid!"

"I'm not telling you anything about my professor," Matthew said, his face twisting into a grimace.

"Oh, please. Who do you think I am?" Barney grinned smugly. "Once I've got my sights set on a target, no one escapes. You don't have to say a word—I'll figure it out."

"So, nothing's gonna stop you, huh?" Adam said with a cold laugh. "Not Matthew's future, not your friendship with him—nothing?"

"Come on!" Barney paused, throwing his hands up. "Why's it gotta be so dramatic? How does this even tie into Matthew's future?"

"Are you seriously clueless, or just pretending?" Adam scoffed. "Want Matthew to spell it out for you—how this could mess up his career and his whole life?"

"Barney, for real," Matthew cut in, his tone dead serious. "Don't mess around with this. She's our prof for a core class. If you piss her off, I might not even graduate. You know how hard I've worked to get through law school!"

Law school, like med school, started with undergrads and came with a hefty price tag. Just look at Matthew's pants—one glance told the story. A Columbia Law student with only one pair of dress pants?

He only pulled them out for formal occasions, and even then, they'd worn out over time, sporting a hole he couldn't afford to fix. No cash for a new pair. He'd just grab a pen and color over the white underwear peeking through, trying to blend it in so no one would notice at first glance.

And yet, Barney—being the "thoughtful" friend he was—once yanked those pants right off Matthew during a stunt to drag him along for some company fun. Forced to buy a new pair, Matthew got roped into Barney's lie about a "50% discount." When the bill arrived, though? Even with the discount, it was thousands of dollars—way more than he could swing.

So, he gave up his dream of volunteering with his idol at an environmental org to make the world a better place. Instead, he ended up at Barney's shady, planet-trashing company, defending those jerks for a paycheck. Sure, the money was good, but Matthew wasn't happy. His skills barely grew. Barney just wanted a playmate at work—dragging him into pranks against the "enemy" in the building across the street, wasting time and energy.

It wasn't until Matthew earned enough to pay off that overpriced custom suit—and nearly lost himself and Lily in the process—that he snapped out of it. He quit, determined to get back on track. All that chaos? Just because of one of Barney's dumb jokes.

Speaking of which—imagine Matthew stumbling across that while scrolling X during this mess. Maybe it's some creator he'd actually enjoy, who knows?

Lily and Ted turned to Barney too, their eyes boring into him.

"Alright, alright!" Barney groaned, slumping under the weight of everyone's stares. "I won't mess around, okay? Happy now?"

"Hope you mean that," Adam said, giving him a long, hard look.

Ding-a-ling!

The phone rang.

"Ross?" Adam answered. "Got it, I'll be right there."

He hung up, gave the group a quick heads-up, and rushed off to the ER. Ever since he started interning at the medical center, it felt like his friends were ending up in the ER way more often. Nah, had to be his imagination.

"Adam!"

The second he arrived, a panda-faced figure whined pitifully.

"Ross?" Adam squinted, barely recognizing him. It wasn't his fault—Ross's face was a mess. Both eyes blackened, cheeks bruised and swollen. Even his own mom would've had the same "uh, who?" reaction.

"What happened to you?" Adam asked.

"I got beat up," Ross mumbled, sounding both heartbroken and humiliated.

"Yeah, I can see that," Adam said, half-laughing, half-cringing. "But why?"

Ross might have a short fuse sometimes, but he was a total homebody who avoided trouble. Back in the day, he and Chandler got bullied by two jerks so bad they stopped going to Central Perk. They'd either choke down nasty instant coffee at home or sneak into the café, chugging scalding coffee and bolting before the bullies showed up. Adam had to step in to fix it. Otherwise, Ross—tough as he acted—only ever got feisty playing football with his little sister, Monica. Even then, her competitive streak usually put him in his place. Adam couldn't picture Ross picking a fight with anyone.

Well... okay, maybe he could. It'd be all bluster—acting tough until it was go-time, then stalling with a million conditions. "No face shots!" he'd say. "No using a watch as a weapon—wait, can I use mine?" Then he'd trip over some kid's jump rope while chasing whoever snatched his stuff.

"It was Mona," Ross said, voice heavy with defeat.

"Pfft!" Adam snorted. "What, she went full domestic violence on you and left you like this?"

"Can you let me finish?" Ross glared—or tried to, with those panda eyes.

"Hahaha!" Adam cracked up harder. The glare, the bruises—it was too ridiculous.

"..." Ross just deflated, totally done.

"Okay, okay, I'm done laughing," Adam said, reining it in. "So, Mona? Weren't you so into her you ignored Rachel—even when she was pregnant with your kid? How'd it come to this?"

"I didn't ignore her!" Ross snapped, flustered. "I asked Rachel if she wanted to get back together, and she said no. I didn't ditch her and Emma for Mona!"

"Oh, wait—it's official? Emma?" Adam raised an eyebrow, surprised.

"Yeah, Rachel picked it," Ross said, shrugging. "I wanted Helen."

"You're kidding, right?" Adam's lip twitched. "Helen Geller? Didn't you shoot that down when Carol was pregnant with your first kid? What'd you say back then?"

"..." Ross's face went sheepish.

Helen Geller. Sounded way too close to Helen Keller—the famous writer who lost her sight and hearing as a kid and wrote *If I Had Three Days of Light*. Inspiring? Sure. But no parent wants their kid's name to hint at that kind of struggle. Back then, Ross had scoffed and fought tooth and nail against it. Yet somehow, with Rachel's baby, he'd blanked on all that.

"It's different!" Ross insisted. "Rachel's not marrying me, so the kid'll take her last name. Helen Green? Still a solid name!"

Chapter 470: A Tale to Break Your Heart and Bring Tears to Your Eyes

Medical Center. Emergency Room.

"Not bad at all," Adam said, nodding. He didn't bother commenting on the name again—honestly, as long as it wasn't Adam Green or Adam Geller, he was cool with it.

"So, about you getting beat up—what's the story there?" he asked, leaning in a little.

Ross, sporting a pair of panda eyes and a bruised, swollen face, put on his best sad-puppy look. "I broke up with Monica," he said, voice dripping with woe. Adam had to bite his cheek to keep from laughing.

"Uh-huh," Adam hummed, keeping it neutral.

"She dumped me—can you believe it?" Ross's voice shot up an octave. "After everything I did for her!"

Adam raised an eyebrow. "Oh? What'd you do for her?"

Ross froze for a second, racking his brain. Then he blurted, "I gave her the keys to my apartment! And I even stood up to Dr. Green for her!"

Adam smirked. "Yeah, but didn't you change the locks right after handing her those keys? And I heard about that Dr. Green thing—word is, you didn't exactly 'stand up.' You were sweating bullets, playing both sides, and ended up collapsed on the couch, practically falling apart."

"Hey!" Ross snapped, his voice rising. "That was an accident! I only had one key! If I didn't change the locks, I'd have been locked out of my own place! And when Dr. Green called her that nasty name, I totally yelled at him to stop!"

Adam tilted his head. "Yeah... that one time."

Ross wobbled like he was about to pass out from sheer frustration. Adam quickly grabbed his arm and guided him to a seat. "But, you know, that was you totally having her back! You were good to her, man."

"Yeah, but she didn't appreciate it one bit," Ross grumbled, slumping down and taking a few heavy breaths. "Rachel's pregnant with my daughter, right? So I figured it'd be smart to take better care of them—let Rachel move in for a while. That's reasonable, isn't it?"

"Totally reasonable," Adam agreed, nodding solemnly.

Ross let out a dramatic sigh. "Ugh, it's my fault, really. The lock thing, Rachel moving in—she had every right to be mad. I just kinda wish she'd dumped me sooner."

Adam's mouth twitched. Seriously, dude? Monica forgave your sorry butt, and you still pushed it.

"This isn't even my worst breakup, though," Ross went on, suddenly in the mood to spill. He gave a bitter laugh. "After Carol, I had this one time I got dumped mid... you know, unmentionable stuff. That was a disaster."

Adam couldn't hold it in—he snorted. "I can imagine. You didn't propose to her, did you?"

"What? No way!" Ross looked horrified. "Why would you even think that?"

Adam grinned. "I know a guy who did that exact thing—proposed right in the heat of the moment. Didn't work out, and boom, breakup. You're both impulsive, but he's more the emotional type."

Ross nodded along, then froze mid-nod, glaring at Adam like he'd just caught on. Adam chuckled. "Let's get those injuries patched up. Keep talking."

"Nah, nothing else to say," Ross huffed, crossing his arms.

"Cool," Adam said with a shrug, focusing on cleaning him up.

A few minutes passed in silence until Ross couldn't hold it in anymore. "After we split, I started missing her. She was an amazing girlfriend, you know?"

"But she's not Rachel," Adam tossed out casually.

Ross went still, then sighed. "Rachel's not even Rachel anymore."

Adam shot him a sideways glance. Oh, really, buddy? What's that supposed to mean—mad she can't fit into her pink cheerleader outfit anymore? You, the guy who got dumped mid-parking-lot makeout, don't get to judge!

"Ow!" Ross yelped.

"Whoops, sorry," Adam said, his grin a little too smug.

"You sure you know how to treat injuries?" Ross muttered, eyeing him suspiciously.

"Want me to send you to another hospital?" Adam teased.

"Huh?" Ross blinked. "Why would I go somewhere else?"

"Because here, no one's gonna question my skills," Adam said with a modest little smile.

"I'm not doubting your skills," Ross shot back. "I'm doubting your attitude. Don't think I haven't noticed you're Team Rachel all the way."

Adam laughed. "Here's hoping Emma inherits your brains and Rachel's looks."

Ross's mouth twitched. He knew Adam was roasting him.

"Anyway," Ross continued, "after the breakup, I missed Monica so much I went to her favorite French restaurant. Wanted to relive some sweet memories, you know? Place is super popular—I waited in line for a whole hour just to get in.

But get this—they wouldn't let me in! Said I didn't have a female companion!"

"Pfft!" Adam burst out laughing. "For real?"

Who knew single guys had it this rough? Adam figured these heartbreaking, tear-jerking tragedies were a future thing—guess not!

"Dead serious!" Ross fumed. "The waiter said it's their gimmick—'crafted for goddesses' or some nonsense. You need a lady to invite you in. Back when I went with Monica, I never noticed. But this time, I'm solo, waiting forever, and no one says a word until I'm at the door—then they tell me to scram. Who can deal with that?"

"So you started swinging?" Adam asked, smirking.

"No way!" Ross said, indignant. "I'm a university professor—I don't just throw punches! I argued my case, laid out the facts, and they finally caved. They sent a waitress to 'escort' me in as my temporary date."

"And then?" Adam grinned. "She was too hot, and you couldn't keep your hands to yourself?"

"As if!" Ross rolled his panda eyes. "If it wasn't about proving a point, I'd have bailed. It was so awkward—total strangers!"

"So who beat you up, then?" Adam asked, still chuckling.

Ross groaned. "Turns out the pretty waitress has a boyfriend who's a total jealousy freak. He showed up, saw us, and didn't even ask—just clocked me in the face! I was out of it, and by the time I came to, I looked like this. If his girlfriend hadn't begged for forgiveness, I'd have made him pay!"

"Oh, sure," Adam teased. "If she wasn't hot, no amount of begging would've saved him, right?"

Ross clammed up.

"Single life's rough, man," Adam said. "Pro tip: check the signs before you walk into a place. Not just that spot—brunch joints are brutal too. Total anti-single vibes. I've got a friend who loved this one brunch place, but after his breakup, the staff hit him with the 'Oh, just you?' line and a pity stare. Crushed him. He ended up dragging a guy friend along just to eat there—almost sparked a whole misunderstanding."

"That's ridiculous!" Ross growled. "I'm done with those places!"

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