

TV Show 631

Chapter 631: Self-Vigilance

The night passed smoothly enough.

The next day rolled around.

Adam headed to the medical center, the spring breeze brushing against him. 🌸

Sheldon and Missy were already gone.

They both had their own stuff to deal with—no way they could stick around forever to keep their little cousin and aunt company.

Even Sheldon's grandma had taken off.

Yup, you heard that right!

She's that charming! 😏

A bunch of old guys were chasing after her, dying to marry her, but no dice.

She's got a lover back in Texas, deep in the honeymoon phase, pining for her return.

But her daughter, the super-devout Mary who's all about God, didn't have the time—or patience—for that.

Naturally, Mary had some strong opinions about it.

Still, Grandma, as always, flipped the script and told her daughter to get a life of her own.

"How old am I?" she'd say.

"And how old are you?"

"Whose life's more chill here?"

The answer was obvious. 😊

Changing Room

"Whoa, look who's here—the Dance God himself!"

Christina spotted Adam and immediately started teasing him. "So, how many nurses did you sweep off their feet last night?" 🦋

"You didn't show up," Adam said with a grin.

"I told you I wasn't going!" Christina shrugged. "Dance parties? Not my thing."

"Meredith and George were there, though," Adam said, glancing at George and Meredith—who was keeping her head down. He added with a sly tone, "I bet they had a blast."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Christina's radar pinged instantly, and she eyed her two buddies suspiciously.

"Nothing!" George waved it off, all prim and proper.

"He's quite the ladies' man," Adam teased. "Dr. Callie Torres straight-up asked him to dance."

"Callie Torres? The ortho resident?" Christina's jaw dropped. "Wow, George, you're finally stepping up your game!" 😬

"It's not like that!" George protested, flustered. "We just... appreciated each other. Totally innocent. Not like you and Meredith."

"Not like us how?" Christina shot him a icy glare.

"Uh—forget I said anything," George mumbled, dropping his head. No way he was tangling with his crush and her sharp-tongued bestie. He was outmatched.

"Meredith, you went too?" Christina turned to the still-silent Meredith. "With Finn?"

Finn's a vet—yep, a veterinarian—and recently started dating Meredith.

Emmm.

They met at a bar, of course.

Meredith's dream of knitting sweaters and staying celibate in a bar? Totally crashed and burned. 😬

"Yeah," Adam said, his smile turning weirdly cryptic.

"Finn's a decent guy," Christina said, missing Adam's vibe. She nodded at Meredith like they were dissecting a boyfriend review. "Not as hot as McDreamy, but a solid catch."

"Uh-huh," Meredith stiffened, slamming her locker shut with a bang. She gave a half-hearted grunt and bolted for the door.

"Huh?" Christina might be slow on the uptake sometimes, but she wasn't that dumb. Something was up. She glanced at Adam's smirking face and chased after Meredith.

Morning. ER.

"What's the situation?"

"Newborn preemie, found in a school dumpster. Umbilical cord's still attached," the paramedic rattled off quickly.

"You didn't start an IV? He's dehydrated!" Adam took over, checking the baby fast.

"Couldn't find a vein," the paramedic shook his head.

"I need a vein access point," Adam barked at a nurse. "Get me a bone marrow needle, a neonatal intubation kit, and call Dr. Montgomery-Shepherd!"

"Yes, Doctor!" The nurse sprang into action.

Neonatal Unit

"Adam, what's going on?" Dr. Montgomery rushed in.

"Preemie with bruising, platelet count at 17,000. CT shows internal bleeding—things are bad," Adam explained.

"17,000? Have you transfused yet?" Montgomery asked, stunned.

"Of course," Adam nodded. "But we need the mom ASAP for platelet antibody testing. Problem is, he was dumped in a school trash bin—probably some underage student who gave birth in secret. The school's still investigating."

"Dr. Montgomery-Shepherd, some people are here. They say it's about the baby," a nurse interrupted.

"Got it," Montgomery nodded. "Adam, keep him stable. I'll check it out."

"Let me know if you need me," Adam said, still focused on the tiny abandoned preemie.

Family Waiting Area

Four teenage girls in school uniforms sat in a row, their parents—moms or dads—facing them. Total silence. Awkward city. 😬

"I'm Dr. Montgomery-Shepherd, treating the newborn," Montgomery said as she approached. "He's got an emergency bleed. We need to know whose baby this is."

"Yeah, we'd all love to know," one mom snapped, glaring at her daughter. "Sarah, spill it!"

"I don't know anything about this baby," Sarah said, pushing up her glasses. She looked like a total good-girl type, shaking her head.

"Yeah, none of us do," another chimed in.

"One of you does," Montgomery cut through the noise. "Or your parents wouldn't have dragged you here."

"Our girls..." one mom hesitated. "The principal said they were the last ones in the bathroom before the baby was found. We just wanted to figure this out before the cops show up."

"Someone here knows," a dad growled, pointing at the girls. "Admit it! I don't want my Lisa caught up in this. The police are almost here!"

In the U.S., abandoning a baby's illegal. Jail time's on the table.

"Can't you just do a DNA test?" another mom groaned. "Then the rest of us can leave!"

"DNA takes days," Montgomery sighed. "I don't care when you leave—this baby doesn't have days. If we don't treat him soon, he'll die! I'm doing a pelvic exam on every girl here."

"My daughter's 14! She's not capable of this! You're not touching her!" one mom shouted.

"If you won't let her, you're hiding something!" the lone dad roared. "Doc, do whatever tests you need—just clear my Lisa fast!"

"I don't need your permission

Chapter 632: Slapping Herself Twice and Asking, "Are You Scared?"

Medical Center

"I can tell who's lying," Adam said calmly. "And Shanong's shoes have bloodstains that haven't been completely wiped off. Didn't you guys notice?"

Everyone's eyes snapped to the teenage girl Shanong's shoes in unison.

In typical American TV drama fashion, the high school girl was wearing a short skirt outfit. Shanong immediately pressed her legs together—maybe a shy reflex—but she also subtly slid her heels under the chair.

"No point hiding it. I saw it!"

A sharp-eyed mother, tipped off by Adam, had already spotted a faint dark red smear on Shanong's heel. She connected the dots: a girl giving birth to her first kid in a bathroom would definitely leave blood dripping behind.

The blood on the outside of her sneakers might've been easy to wipe off, but the inner lining? Once it soaked in, no amount of water was getting that out.

Since it was just a tiny spot, no one had thought to look for it before. But now that Adam pointed it out, it was the smoking gun.

"It's definitely her!"

The other girls' parents practically cheered. This cleared their daughters' names completely.

You've got to understand—without someone confessing, all four girls would've carried this suspicion through high school. Whether the girls could handle it was one thing, but the parents? No way they could deal with the gossip and finger-pointing.

Reputation matters. Even in the U.S., people care about saving face.

Sure, rich folks can pack up and move whenever they want as a last resort, but it's not that simple for most.

"Shanong, are you still not going to admit it?" Dr. Montgomery asked, her voice heavy with disappointment as she looked at the sweet, innocent-looking girl. "Your son's dying. He needs your help!"

"There was no solid evidence pointing to you before, so we couldn't force a check," Adam added. "But now there's proof, and with the baby on the brink of death, it's enough for a judge to issue an emergency order. Even without it, a DNA test in a few days will give us the truth."

Smack!

Smack!

Shanong's expression shifted. She raised her hands and—bam!—slapped herself hard on both cheeks. Then her lips quivered, tears streamed down her face, and she whimpered, "Wahhh! It's all my fault! I was so scared, I didn't mean for this to happen! 😞 I'm only 14—I don't know anything..."

The sudden self-slapping stunned everyone.

Like, what?! You're confessing, fine, but why slap yourself twice? Was it guilt? Or some weird flex to scare someone?

"..."

Adam's mouth twitched.

His sharp senses picked up something else: when Shanong slapped herself, the other three girls—heads down—flinched in sync with the sound. Perfect timing.

He got it instantly.

These girls weren't just covering for her out of friendship. It was fear—mostly fear.

Shanong, the shortest of the four, with her slim frame and pure, sweet face, had something about her that terrified the others. She wasn't the "tough big sis" type like Penny, but she was absolutely a queen bee.

Her ruthless core hid behind that innocent smile. Only her little crew knew the real her.

And that self-slapping? She'd probably done it to others before. The sweeter her face, the harsher her moves—the contrast made her downright terrifying.

No wonder the other three girls, even under pressure from parents, cops, and the baby's life hanging in the balance, didn't dare say a word or even twitch.

School, parents, police, a dying baby—all that stress on 14-year-old shoulders paled next to one sideways glance from Shanong.

They were scared—legit scared!

A 14-year-old hiding a pregnancy, rallying her posse, giving birth in a bathroom, tossing the baby in the trash, cleaning up, and strolling back to class with a smile like nothing happened?

If that's not unhinged, what is? 😬

And if she's that unhinged, how could the other 14-year-olds not be terrified?

Adam got it. He felt for them.

This was a mashup world of American TV dramas where freaks popped up left and right. Back when he first crossed over, even with a system, Adam struggled for years—forced to become a total actor just to survive!

When you're up against a psycho who'd hurt or kill immigrated without blinking, how could a normal person not be afraid? What, bet on their knife being dull?

"Stop crying for a sec," Dr. Montgomery cut in, her expression a mix of shock and unease as she looked at Shanong. "Since you've admitted it, come with me for a test. We need to save the baby—now."

She was reeling.

Shanong was the last person she'd suspected. The gap between her sweet exterior and this twisted reality—plus that chilling self-slap act—sent shivers down her spine.

"Mhm, mhm!" Shanong nodded, wiping tears, then threw herself into her adoptive mom's arms. "Mommy, I don't want to go to jail! I didn't mean it! You've got to help me... 😞"

The mother-daughter duo sobbed in a corner for a while until Dr. Montgomery urged them again, and they finally went for the test.

The other three girls' parents, overjoyed, took their silent daughters home. Shanong's adoptive mom stayed behind, her face a mess of emotions.

Adam gave her a long look, shook his head, and left.

His super hearing had caught something no one else did: while Shanong hugged her mom and cried, she'd whispered in her ear.

"Call my birth parents," she'd said. "It's come to this. It's not what I wanted, but it's a good chance, right? Tell them if they don't want their reputation trashed, they'll hire me the best lawyer. I'm not going to jail.

"They think I'm a sick burden, too much trouble, and want to ditch me to live their carefree lives? Dream on! If I'm messed up, it's their fault for making me!

"This time, you've got to step up. It's do or die. Don't flake out like before, scared off by their lawyer's smooth talk without even seeing them.

"Useless! No effort, no reward. If we pull this off, you won't have to worry about money ever again.

"But if I end up in jail, when I get out, you'll be my enemy—just like them.

"Mom, you don't want to be my enemy, do you?"

Her adoptive mom's voice shook. "N-No..."

"Good." Shanong hugged her tighter, sobbing while whispering, "Once we hook them, think about it: if my birth parents suddenly died one day, who'd get all their money? Us, right?"

"Don't worry—they're Hollywood stars. Overdosing or whatever happens all the time.

"Maybe I could even debut in Hollywood 'in their memory.' With my looks, I'd outshine them—become a real star.

"We'd be swimming in cash. Don't you want that rich life?"

"No turning back now. Don't wimp out—go for it! I'm waiting for good news."

Adam, hearing all this, silently mourned Shanong's birth parents for a few seconds.

But he wouldn't say a word. One, no one would believe it without proof. Two, in his eyes, her birth parents kinda deserved it.

He had no time for this mess.

As Tree Man Zhou once said: "With that time, why not learn about scientists pushing humanity forward or check on their health? Way more meaningful than this drama."

Adam couldn't agree more. 😊

Why waste time on this when he could study math with the gorgeous genius Peggy, spark her research, or just chat with her? Now that's worth it!

Chapter 633: Adam: I Want to Hold the Earth and Juggle Three Neutron Stars

Medical Center. Neonatal Unit.

After Adam sniffed out the cold-hearted little princess hiding her secret, the poor abandoned baby dumped in the trash got a fresh shot at life. ✨

With the mom's platelet antibody test done, Dr. Montgomery managed to pull the little guy through.

Outside the incubator, Montgomery gazed at the baby boy with pity. "Poor little thing. How could anyone be this heartless?"

"There's no shortage of ruthless people out there," Adam sighed beside her. "Good thing the internet isn't that powerful yet. Otherwise, I can't imagine how he'd deal with all this later in life."

In his past life, when Adam was a kid, parents would jokingly say they picked their kids up from the trash.

It was just a playful tease back then.

But now? It's turning into reality more and more. 🤖

Once the internet has a memory—when nothing gets deleted, and everything's searchable—this kid, abandoned and nearly left to die by his ice-cold mom, might stumble across those reports one day. What kind of experience would that be?

In the world of American TV dramas, every psycho's got a messed-up childhood.

If this near-dead abandoned boy goes dark in the future, it'd be straight out of a TV script.

"Let's not even talk about the future," Montgomery said, her voice heavy. "What happens to him now is already enough to worry about. Once he's discharged, he'll either end up with a mom who might be headed to jail or a grandma who's got no clue what's going on."

"She's not exactly clueless," Adam shook his head.

From the bombshell info he'd picked up, Shannon's adoptive mom wasn't some saint either.

Maybe she started out that way.

But now? Not so much.

Whether she chose it or got dragged into it, she'd started using Shannon's identity to cash in—and that's where the downward spiral began.

Lu Xun once said: "How you treat your parents, your kids are watching and learning. Through words and actions, subtly over time, one day they'll treat you the same way."

If this baby ends up with that mother-daughter duo, it might just be another vicious cycle.

Adam had already looked into the odds of a welfare agency taking the kid.

But with the mom—and especially the grandma—not letting go, snagging custody was a long shot.

Plus, it'd drag in the kid's real grandparents from Hollywood.

A celebrity scandal? Add in a billionaire, a genius doctor, a 14-year-old girl, and the "who's the daddy" mystery, and the tabloids would lose their minds.

Tony Stark single-handedly keeping a swarm of gossip rags afloat? That's no joke. 😊

Adam felt a pang of sympathy, but he wasn't about to dive headfirst into this mess.

Stuff like this? It's a hassle magnet.

If it were Liz, she'd probably charge in, all fired up about doing the right thing, consequences be damned.

But Adam wasn't Liz.

He knew he wasn't some invincible superhero.

The sleazy media, chasing clicks with zero morals, could easily push things past his limits and derail his top priority: saving lives and extending his own.

"Guess I'll need to buy up more media company stocks," Adam mused, ever the practical guy.

No wonder the rich keep chasing more money and power—it's a never-ending game.

Unless you're some godlike being holding the Earth in your palm and juggling three neutron stars, invincible and bored enough to spar with yourself, there's no real security.

"There's always some jerk out to get me!"

Montgomery clearly had a soft spot for this little abandoned baby, sticking around to keep an eye on him.

Adam, after letting his thoughts wander off track, closed the case in his mind and stepped out.

Of course, he'd already passed Shannon's info to his security team. They'd keep tabs on her, and if anything smelled like a threat, he'd get a heads-up.

When the time came, Adam would handle it—either out in the open or behind the scenes—to nip it in the bud.

Surgical Bulletin Board

"You've got to be kidding me!"

Dr. Bailey's unmistakable voice boomed out. "Whose panties are these, pinned up on the bulletin board?! People, this is a hospital! We do serious work here—we save lives! Whose are these?! Fess up!"

Adam strolled over and saw it: a pair of black women's underwear, neatly pinned up, with a note that read, "Lost and Found."

Dr. Bailey, back early from maternity leave, stood there, hands on hips, glaring daggers at everyone. 🔥

A bunch of staff were snickering off to the side.

Meredith and Christina stood there, looking nervous as heck.

"I knew it was one of you," Bailey zeroed in on them, her face like stone. "It's always my interns—always!"

First Alex, then Liz—both had left under circumstances that should've gotten them fired.

If Bailey weren't a universally respected doctor with top-notch skills and character, any other resident would've been hauled in for a review to figure out if it was the interns screwing up or the resident failing at mentorship.

Even with the hospital and colleagues still backing her, Bailey took it hard.

Alex and Liz were her interns. She might come off as a tough nut, but deep down, she poured her heart into every one of them.

She wanted to mold them into solid doctors, but neither Alex nor Liz gave her a chance. Every so often, they'd pull some wild, out-of-left-field stunt that hit her like a punch to the throat, leaving her speechless.

She'd just gotten over the Liz fiasco, desperate to keep her remaining interns from imploding, and came back early—only to walk into this nonsense first thing.

Christina turned her head, shooting Meredith a look like, "You better own up to this."

She wasn't about to take the fall.

But Meredith just stood there, wide-eyed and frozen.

Adam, watching it all, had already pieced it together.

Those panties? Probably from last night's party, when Meredith and Dr. Shepherd ducked into some random hospital room to relive old times—and Shepherd swiped them afterward.

Emmm.

When Adam left with Peggy, he'd caught a glimpse of it.

Meredith's current boyfriend, Finn the vet, was still cluelessly wandering the party, wondering where his girlfriend had vanished to.

And this morning, Adam saw Montgomery pin those panties up herself, staring at them with a complicated look before walking off.

All morning, Montgomery's mood had been off. Especially when Shannon and her crew tried to bury the truth—she'd snapped, "The truth can't be hidden forever. It'll come out eventually."

That's why Adam had been giving Meredith that sly look in the changing room earlier. 😊

"Oh no, I left my panties here again," a slightly chubby female resident said, waddling over to snatch them down. "Sorry, Bailey, my bad."

Bailey looked surprised but didn't push it.

The woman was her peer, another stellar doctor who practically lived at the hospital. A slip-up like this? Not unheard of.

"Phew," Christina exhaled as Bailey walked off, patting a dazed George on the shoulder. "George, she's alright. I'm starting to like her."

Yup!

That chubby resident? Callie Torres, the ortho doc who's got a thing for George.

"Montgomery's pretty cool too—gave them a quick wash for her," Adam said, strolling up with a teasing grin.

"What?!" Meredith yelped, mortified.

Adam's little nudge made it worse.

Back in the day, she didn't see herself as the "other woman"—just a girl duped by a jerk.

But now? She couldn't claim that anymore. 😬

Chapter 634: What's It Like Having a Tree Inside Your Body?

Medical Center, Surgical Ward Hallway

"What just happened?" George asked, still a little dazed, his face looking all kinds of awkward.

"Are you jealous?" Christina blurted out, totally shocked.

"No, I'm not!" George shot back, denying it hard—but his expression wasn't fooling anyone.

"No way, you're jealous over her already?" Christina said, wide-eyed, then glanced at Meredith.

"Isn't that a good thing?" Adam chimed in with a grin. "Dr. Torres is awesome, and it's totally normal for George to like her. 😊"

The group laughed and teased for a bit before splitting up.

"OMG!" Sheldon's mom, Mary, caught wind of the commotion and wandered over. She took one look and groaned, "Lord have mercy!" with a face full of judgment.

She wasn't a fan of this laid-back vibe.

"Adam, are you doctors always this... casual?" Mary asked, frowning.

"Nah, this is an exception," Adam said quickly. "Didn't you see how mad Dr. Bailey was? This is a hospital—a place to save lives. It's not usually like this."

"Oh, well, that's a relief," Mary replied, grabbing her blushing niece Emilia by the arm. "Girls need to respect themselves. Don't you dare pick up habits like this..."

Adam bolted out of there fast. 😊

Emergency Room

"Dr. Duncan, the trauma center just called. An ambulance is on its way—patient's in bad shape," a nurse said, rushing up to him.

"Got it," Adam nodded. He stretched out his arms, letting the nurse help him into his surgical gown, then headed outside to wait for the ambulance.

Outside the Hospital

An ambulance screeched up, sirens blaring.

"Jill, what's the situation?" Adam asked, jogging over.

He'd memorized every name in the hospital—naturally, he wouldn't forget the paramedics who rolled through all the time either.

"Harry Hernandez, 14, was sledding on his back, lost control, and smashed into a car," Jill explained. "Witnesses say he got launched at least 20 feet into the air, landed in a pile of branches. Pelvis is obviously shattered—I'm betting on serious internal bleeding."

By the end, Jill's face was like, I don't even know how to describe this.

Adam's expression turned dead serious.

No kidding—20 feet? That's over six meters, two stories high! And not just falling, but tumbling out of control. That's a recipe for disaster.

And the ground? Not a soft lawn, but a tangle of branches.

Still, even with all that prep, when the other paramedics carefully wheeled the kid out of the ambulance, Adam sucked in a breath.

"Holy shit!" he thought to himself.

There, on the stretcher, was a teenage boy, lying flat. Behind his head? A patch of green.

Normally, Adam might've cracked a joke about the kid being "green behind the ears," but not now. He couldn't bring himself to say it.

Because that green patch was a literal tree—and a branch, about 10 centimeters thick, was sticking straight through the boy's right side.

Yup, you heard that right.

When he got flung and crashed, the branch had impaled him.

This was way scarier than that thin steel pipe that once skewered two people.

"Harry, you're at the hospital now. We've got you," Adam said, stepping up to help move the stretcher while talking to the kid, who was still awake but fading fast.

"The hospital? What happened to me?" the boy mumbled, pain and fear cracking his voice into a whimper.

"You're an idiot, that's what!"

A car pulled up, and a balding middle-aged guy jumped out, storming over and yelling at the boy in a mix of panic and fury.

"Dad..." the kid muttered, guilty.

"Sir, back off!" Adam snapped, frowning.

The nurses rushed in, holding back the frantic dad as Adam and the team wheeled the stretcher into the hospital.

"You and your friends are idiots! You didn't use the brains God gave you and pulled this boneheaded stunt!" the boy's dad shouted, shoving past nurses and pointing at his son. They kept blocking him, though.

With injuries this bad, Adam sent him straight to the OR. Dr. Burke and Chief of Surgery Richard rushed over, and the operation kicked off fast.

"His kidney's toast—no saving it," someone reported.

"First, let's clamp the renal artery!"

"I've got another bleed here, Dr. Duncan!"

"On it—leave it to me," Adam replied.

"Everyone, this is gonna take hours. Is the blood supply ready?"

Chief Richard ran the show.

"Yes, Chief," a nurse confirmed.

Hours Later

"The frame's locked in."

"No major bleeding—pathway's clear."

"Did his parents come say goodbye?"

"Mom hasn't made it yet. Dad's a wreck and won't come in."

After getting the updates, Chief Richard took a deep breath. "Okay, team, prep to remove the branch. Everyone in position—cut carefully, break it into pieces, and pull it out."

With an injury like this, no one was sure he'd make it.

Chances were, once the branch came out, the kid would bleed out fast. That's why they usually let families say goodbye first—just in case.

But the dad was too pissed about his son's recklessness—or maybe too scared to face losing him—and skipped it.

They'd given him the chance. If he wouldn't take it, Adam and the team weren't waiting. They dove into the riskiest part: removing the branch.

The surgery dragged on into the night.

Miraculously, after losing a kidney and a chunk of intestine, the kid pulled through.

Everyone marveled at the wonder of life.

Same species, same single life.

Some people die from a minor procedure, while others survive this with barely a hitch.

It's hard not to wonder if there's some higher power at play. ☒

"Thank God!" the boy's dad said when Adam and Dr. Burke went to see him. He launched into a prayer, then collapsed into a chair, looking lost all over again.

"Mr. Hernandez, your son's okay," Dr. Burke said, confused.

"I know," the dad said with a bitter laugh. "It's my fault! I knew that sled was dangerous but didn't put my foot down. Him and his buddies had a track up on the hill. I kept picturing him sliding down while I was waiting—I should've stopped him!"

"Kids can get out of hand sometimes," Dr. Burke offered. "They spiral, and you can't always rein them in..."

"No! I could've controlled it!" the dad cut in. "I should've! Before they're old enough to think straight, it's my job as a parent to keep him safe—at least stop him from killing himself!"

He choked up. "Ever since the divorce, I only get him every other weekend. I never should've bought that damn sled.

"No matter how much he begged, I shouldn't have caved!

"I was weak!

"When he needed a dad, I was weak!

"That's not right!"

Watching this dad break down, Dr. Burke stayed neutral, but Adam? He felt it deep.

He agreed with the guy.

Until kids grow up, it's a parent's basic duty to stop them from doing dumb, deadly stuff.

But with divorce splitting families apart, parents can't raise kids as a team anymore. Instead, they're stuck trying to win over a kid they barely see on visitation days.

That overindulgence, that hesitation to set rules—it's bound to cause problems.

Just a question of how big.

Chapter 635: The Skinny Reality

Medical Center

Fresh off another classic TV-drama-style case—where someone chasing freedom ended up battered and barely able to mutter "I am Groot"—Adam's phone buzzed.

It was Matthew on the line.

He wanted to meet up, and his vibe was way off.

Old Friends Bar

"Adam!" Matthew waved him over.

"Hey!" Adam strolled up, plopped down across from him, and gave him a quick once-over. The guy looked worried, but not angry or hopeless. That was a good sign. 😊

"What's up? What's got you down?"

"It's Lily," Matthew said, taking a swig of his beer. "Ever since she painted that picture of our wedding last week, she's been off. She doesn't even want to go to work anymore. Adam, do you think she doesn't want to marry me?"

"Nah, it's not that," Adam said with a grin. "Actually, this one's on me! Lily mentioned she's been thinking about her old college dreams lately. Matthew, do you remember what Lily wanted back when she started college?"

"Uh..." Matthew tilted his head, then chuckled awkwardly. "All I can picture is the first time I saw her. She looked like an angel stepping into my world—every glance, every smile, pure poetry. But what she said? Dude, I've got nothing."

Emmm.

Total visual, no audio or subtitles. 😊

"Heh," Adam smirked knowingly.

Back then, Matthew—like every other guy—was too busy turning his brain into mush and sweet-talking her with the usual dude flattery. No filter, no memory.

Years later, he probably forgot what he'd said the second it left his mouth.

"She didn't want to be tied down," Adam explained. "She wanted to travel, to become a great artist. That's why she dumped her high school boyfriend. But then, day one of college, she met you, spilled all her dreams, and you two have been head-over-heels ever since. Now you're about to tie the knot."

"So she's regretting it? She doesn't want to marry me?" Matthew zeroed in, sharp as ever.

"Not exactly," Adam said, easing him back. "You know how brides get jittery before the big day—it's normal. She's just hesitating over a life she's not even sure she wants anymore."

Now her dream's popped, she's snapped out of it, and she's just bummed for a bit. She'll bounce back in a few days."

"Her dream popped?" Matthew's eyes widened. "What happened?"

"Lily's always wanted to be a painter, right?" Adam said. "With the wedding creeping up, she's been losing sleep over it for a month. She kept thinking once you're married, bam—kids—and then her shot at chasing her dream's gone for good."

He held up a hand as Matthew opened his mouth. "Don't even try to deny it. Last time we were at your place for Christmas, she nearly freaked out over some nausea."

Clearly, your 'safety measures' are pretty chill."

"You're one to talk," Matthew grumbled. "Robin's still stressing about it."

"..." Adam's lip twitched. No comeback for that.

He couldn't exactly say Robin was fine because she couldn't have kids, could he?

Still, it wasn't a shock Matthew knew. Lily's a chatterbox and tells him everything.

Emmm.

Well, almost everything—except this big future-defining stuff.

You ever seen a couple dating for almost eight years, living together, still gabbing on the phone every lunch break?

They're not sick of it, but everyone else who knows? Totally over it. 😊

"Go on," Matthew said with a sheepish grin.

"So, she didn't want to waste her talent," Adam continued, shooting him a side-eye. "She figured with a little push, she could make it. So I told her to paint something—your wedding, specifically. Put all her real feelings into it, show off her best shot at proving her gift.

Then I took her to a big-deal painter to get it checked out, see if she's got the chops.

Spoiler: she doesn't.

Painting's a hobby for her, not a career."

"Ohhh," Matthew nodded, then gave a wry smile. "So, bottom line, she's still unsure about marrying me."

"Can't totally blame her, though," Adam said, jumping in to smooth things over with a tease. "Back when you met in college, she laid out all these dreams for you—even ditched her high school guy for them. You were all in, cheering her on. What, now you're gonna pull up your pants and pretend it never happened?"

"No way," Matthew said, laughing bitterly. "I just don't know how to support her. Call off the wedding?"

"Of course not," Adam grinned. "She knows she doesn't have the talent now. She's just moody about it. Give her some slack for a while—you've still got over a month till the wedding. She'll come around, I'm sure of it."

"Here's hoping," Matthew sighed, helpless.

Back home, after getting the full scoop, Matthew took Adam's advice and went all-in on patience with Lily's funk.

Didn't want to be a kindergarten teacher anymore?

No problem—do whatever you want!

Her fiancé's chill vibes touched her, and just like that, she perked back up.

Sure, pro artist was off the table, but she still had tons she wanted to try. The thought of quitting to chase those exciting things lit her up again.

Over the next two weeks:

First, she tried being a life coach.

She'd always been the go-to for her friends' venting sessions, dishing out advice and support.

Seemed like a natural fit for a pro gig.

A few days in? She was over it.

For friends, it was love.

For strangers, it was cash—and that soured it fast.

Without that heart behind it, playing "emotional trash can" was a slog.

Good thing Matthew still had her back.

She had other passion projects that got her hyped just thinking about them.

Next up: marine biologist.

Emmm.

Okay, she didn't have the degree for that. She ended up a tour guide at the aquarium instead.

Dreams were plump and juicy; reality was bony and tough. 😊

Obviously, she ditched that one after a few days too.

Then came behavioral poet, beekeeper...

Medical Center

"Lily, what the..." Adam stared at her, arms and face dotted with red welts, looking like a total mess. He couldn't help but laugh.

"I'm done with beekeeping," Lily whined, her face crumpled.

Compared to the earlier dream jobs that just didn't click mentally, this one? Her body straight-up said nope. 🐝

"Adam, help her out quick," Matthew said, all worried.

"Relax," Adam said after a check. "It's not a big deal."

Chapter 636: Seeing Robin Again

Medical Center

"Ow, ouch! That stings! 😬"

Lily winced and groaned as Adam cleaned her bee-sting wounds.

"Adam, go easy on her," Matthew, her fiancé, pleaded from the sidelines. He looked so worried, you'd think he wanted to shove Adam aside and do it himself.

"Oh, come on, Lily, quit faking it," Adam teased. "It's not that bad. Don't just make up stuff so you can bask in Matthew's puppy-dog eyes."

"Lily?" Matthew turned to her, totally thrown.

"Sorry, babe! 😊" Lily fluttered her lashes at him, all flirty and cute.

"Okay, forgiven," Matthew said, melting as he looked into her eyes. The gloom and distraction from a few weeks ago were gone—suddenly, it felt like the early days when they first met, all sparks and longing glances. They were clearly still crazy about each other.

That vibe? It was back, and it felt good!

"Alright, once I finish cleaning this up and get you some meds, you two can head out," Adam said. He could see the lovey-dovey vibes and was happy for them, but still rolled his eyes. "Just don't mess with the wounds, and you can do whatever you want—just spare me the PDA here, okay?"

"Heh heh," Matthew chuckled, grinning like an idiot.

"What are you even saying?!" Lily gasped, putting on an exaggerated show of girly modesty and shyness.

Too bad she's Lily. That act was way too fake to sell.

"Matthew, looks like you've got those bees to thank," Adam said with a smirk. He could tell Lily had finally learned to let go of her wild, unrealistic dreams and focus on what's real—after hitting a few walls, of course.

"We really do," Matthew agreed, nodding thoughtfully.

A while back, he'd been so stressed and sad watching Lily waver and fidget with不安. Now, the clouds had parted, and the moon was shining through.

He was genuinely grateful to those bees.

Without them giving Lily a sharp wake-up sting, who knows how long it would've taken her to snap out of it?

Their wedding was just a month away!

Everything was set—invitations sent months ago, friends and family clearing schedules and booking flights just to be there.

If it got delayed, it'd look bad for Lily in front of his crew.

Yup, at this point, his biggest worry was Lily's rep. He wanted her to shine in front of his loved ones—perfectly—so she could fit right into the Erickson family.

A happy home makes everything better, right?

"Oh, come on, Adam!" Lily pouted, playfully scolding him. "They stung me this bad, and we're supposed to thank them?"

"Why not?" Adam grinned. "There's this East Country novel, *The Legend of the Condor Heroes*. The love story in it? All thanks to bees."

"What?!" Lily's eyes lit up, instantly hooked. "Tell me more!"

As Adam kept cleaning her wounds, he gave the couple a quick rundown of the story.

"See, the heroine grew up with a deep bond with bees. Sixteen years later, she reunited with the hero by stitching words onto their wings. Shouldn't they thank those bees?"

"Wow! What a gorgeous love story! 😊" Lily gushed, staring at the red marks on her hand. Suddenly, they didn't seem painful or ugly—they felt like a sweet blessing.

"Hold up, don't get carried away!" Adam cut in, guessing her thoughts. "That's a legendary tale with mystical vibes. The heroine raised bees from childhood to pull that off. You? Don't go dreaming up nonsense, or you'll just get stung again. Plus, what, you wanna split from Matthew for sixteen years?"

"No way!"

"Never!"

Matthew and Lily shouted in unison.

"Exactly," Adam said with a laugh. "They reunited with bee-wing embroidery and tied the knot. You two? Lily got stung, woke up, and now you're about to tie the knot. Different paths, same happy ending—no need to envy anyone."

"Totally," Matthew said, grabbing Lily's hand.

"Mhm," Lily gazed back at him, all lovestruck. "This story—I want to share it at the wedding. It'll be so perfect..."

She turned to Adam. "Wait, what's it called? I'll buy it!"

"Me too," Matthew chimed in. "I'm hooked on this romance."

"Uh..." Adam froze, unsure what to say.

The Legend of the Condor Heroes was romantic... if you ignored the Dragon Knight bit.

Would Matthew handle that part?

He remembered how Guangu Magic freaked out when Lin Wanyu spoiled it for him—total meltdown.

Matthew's an open-minded American, sure, but his love ideals leaned toward the East Country's "one true love forever" vibe. That twist might wreck him.

Adam recalled how Matthew was a total jealousy monster—like those East Country first-love couples—super proud that every "first" belonged to each other.

But then Robin's sister Kelly visited, and when they all toured New York, they'd debated this stuff.

Turns out, Lily's take on some things didn't match Matthew's.

It sparked a huge fight back then.

If that threw him off, the Dragon Knight part? No chance.

"What's up?" Matthew and Lily asked, eyeing Adam curiously.

"Nothing," Adam said, thinking fast. No way he'd stir up trouble right before their wedding. "It's an East Country novel—no translation. You wouldn't get it. But if you want, hit the bar tonight, and I'll tell you the whole thing."

Emmm. He'd just skip the heart-wrenching parts in his retelling. Easy fix!

"Works for us," Matthew and Lily said, shrugging.

What could they do? They didn't speak East Country—not like Howard or Sheldon.

And even those two? Their Chinese was shaky at best—barely passing a Level 4, mute-and-stumble version.

"OMG! Lily!"

A familiar voice cut through the room.

"Robin!" Lily smiled at the newcomer, then couldn't help sneaking a glance at Adam.

"Robin..." Adam turned too, giving an awkward little grin.

"Lily, what happened to you?"

It was Robin, alright. She didn't even glance at Adam—just zeroed in on Lily's sting marks, scolding her. "Don't tell me you're still chasing those wacky dream experiments?"

"Yup, but this was the last time! And get this—getting stung actually made me happy..."

Lily grabbed Robin and started chattering away, the two of them giggling like kids when they hit the fun parts.

Matthew shot Adam a goofy eyebrow wiggle.

Adam smirked, stayed quiet, and kept working on Lily's wounds—silence is golden, right?

Chapter 637: Robin, See You Later!

Medical Center

Lily and Robin were chatting up a storm when—ding-a-ling—Robin's phone rang.

"I'll be right there," she said after picking up, then waved goodbye to Lily and Matthew.

"What are you standing around for? Go after her!" Lily gave Adam a shove.

Adam grinned and hustled out the door.

"Robin!" he called.

"What do you want?" Robin stopped, turning to him with a chilly stare.

"Nothing big. Just heard from Lily you got a promotion—haven't congratulated you yet," Adam said with a smile.

"That's it?" Robin smirked, unimpressed.

"And, uh, about last time—I'm sorry again," Adam added, sheepish. "I didn't mean it, and you've got every right to be mad at me."

"I don't have time to be mad at you," Robin snapped. "I'm way too busy. I'm getting shipped off overseas soon, and after that, I might never see you again, you jerk."

"Congrats, though! That's what you wanted, right?" Adam kept smiling.

"Obviously," Robin said, chin up. "As a journalist, I can go anywhere in the world. That kind of freedom and joy? You wouldn't get it."

"Stay safe out there," Adam cautioned. "Skip the remote, sketchy spots—tons of weirdos lurk around. Even in big cities, don't let your guard down just because they're famous. Places like Paris have some shady underworld stuff..."

Robin watched him ramble on with safety tips, her eyes suddenly welling up. Then—bam!—she lunged forward, threw her arms around his neck, and chomped down hard on his neck.

"Hiss!" Adam sucked in a breath but didn't push her off.

Last time, he hadn't meant to screw up, but he'd gone too far. He could totally picture how freaked out she'd been these past few days.

A bite to vent? He deserved it. 😊

"My sudden promotion—you had a hand in that, didn't you?" Robin let go after the bite, not going full vampire on him. Still clinging to his neck, she hissed in his ear, "You're such a jerk! A lovable, hateable jerk!"

"Sorry," Adam said, feeling her emotions shift. He relaxed a bit and chuckled, "Yeah, I'm a jerk."

Robin hugged him for a moment longer, then shoved him off and marched away. She flagged down a cab by the road, and just before hopping in, she spun around and shouted at Adam, who was still standing there watching her.

"Adam, you jerk! I hope whoever made you this way gets pregnant with your kid right now—better yet, a daughter! Then you'll turn into a total daughter-dad, freaking out every day that she'll run into a jerk like you!"

With that, she gripped the cab door with her left hand, flipped him the bird with her right, and smirked.

Adam grinned back, flashing an "OK" sign with his right hand.

Robin laughed, slid into the cab, and kept staring at him through the window as the car melted into the distant traffic.

"Sigh," Adam let out a long breath, rubbing the bite mark on his neck as he headed back into the hospital.

"How'd it go? How'd it go?!" Lily pounced the second she saw him, all gossip-hungry.

"How'd what go?" Adam teased.

"Whoa! She bit you!" Lily's eagle eyes zeroed in on the mark on his neck, and she squealed, "You guys made up?!"

"Sort of," Adam said, tugging his collar to cover it.

Lucky for him, Robin didn't go too deep, and with his crazy stamina came crazy healing. It'd fade soon enough.

Otherwise, explaining this to Peggy and the crew? Awkward city. 😞

"What do you mean 'sort of'?" Lily huffed, unsatisfied.

"Didn't you know she's leaving New York?" Adam asked.

"Duh, of course I did!" Lily shrugged. "I'm the one who told you, remember? That's why I said to apologize quick, or who knows when you'd see her again."

"Probably never," Adam nodded.

"Wait, you mean Robin's not coming back?" Matthew, the clear-headed bystander, caught on.

"What?!" Lily froze. "What do you mean she's not coming back to New York? Isn't she just going abroad for some reporting stint?"

"Yeah," Adam sighed. "But with her talent and drive, give her one shot, and she'll skyrocket. After this, you'll spot her all over the world. That's her dream, isn't it?"

"Her dream..." Lily mumbled, then—ding!—it clicked. She swatted Adam. "You jerk! You set up this chance for her, didn't you? You let Robin go! That's your apology?!"

"What else was I supposed to do?" Adam threw up his hands. "Got a better way to say sorry?"

"You're heartless!" Lily fumed. "If I were you, I wouldn't apologize like that. I'd keep her here. Dreams are great, but love's more important—that's your line!"

"That's you," Adam shot back, grinning. "That's you with Robin! I can't compare..."

Lily and Matthew glared in sync, so he dialed it back. "Okay, sorry. I meant shaky dreams don't beat love."

Robin's career chase—is it anything like your 'dreams'?

Don't glare this time!

Think about it: she ditched her pop star life, left home, and hustled solo in a foreign country for years.

She never cared about love or any of that—just her career, her goals.

She even dumped 'good marriage material' Ted to hang with a player like me.

To her, no career, no family.

She's a real dream-chaser!

And you?

Day one of college, you hook up with Matthew and forget your 'dreams'—the same ones you'd just used to dump your high school boyfriend.

Eight years later, wedding's coming, you remember those dreams, find out you've got no talent, and after giving up, you've got a bunch of backup dreams.

Not one lasts a week. Are those even dreams?

Maybe they're just literal daydreams.

Robin's fought hard for hers—it's not the same.

For you, true love trumps fleeting, whimsical dreams.

For Robin? Career over love, every time.

And let's be real, we're not even in love.

Trust me, she knows all this.

But she still smiled and took the chance without a second thought."

"But she's just... gone?" Lily said, voice cracking.

"Yeah, she's gone," Adam confirmed.

"Who's gone?" Ted strolled up, curious.

"Robin..." Lily explained, all mopey.

"Oh," Ted blinked, then shrugged it off.

Real, deep feelings come from time and shared moments piling up.

Without all that follow-up, without the constant push-and-pull, Ted's initial crush on Robin—just a hormonal spark—faded fast. No way it'd turn into the obsessive pining of some alternate timeline.

Chapter 638: Ted's Perfect Match Shows Up

Medical Center

"Ted, how've you been lately?" Adam asked with a grin, glancing at him.

"Uh, well..." Ted met Adam's eyes and started fumbling. "Adam, I was just about to tell you—I broke up with Erica. Sorry..."

"Oh," Adam nodded. "Phone breakup, text, or email?"

"..." Ted's face turned beet red, and he stammered, "No, no, this time it was face-to-face with Erica. A peaceful split—not like you're thinking!"

"You, you little..." Lily shot Ted a look full of 'why can't you get it together?' vibes.

Adam's quick jab had totally called out Ted's past shady moves.

"No biggie," Adam said, chuckling. "Erica's birthday hasn't hit yet, so since you're done, I won't have to deal with you awkwardly calling me from her party. That's good enough for me."

"That's good enough?" Lily gaped at Adam. "Wait, isn't Erica your precious girlfriend Peggy's big sister? You set them up, and this is all you expect from Ted?"

"Of course it's not all I expect," Adam said, shaking his head.

"Phew, that's more like it," Lily sighed, turning her glare back to awkward Ted, ready to team up with Adam and roast him.

In her mind, Erica was gorgeous, decently chill (she'd put up with an abusive artist ex without losing it), and Adam's pick. How could Ted just ditch her like that?

"Is Erica upset?" Adam asked, getting serious as he looked at Ted.

"Nope," Ted said quickly. "Honestly, we're long-distance, and splitting up was a mutual call we talked out."

"Okay," Adam said, staring at Ted for a sec before nodding.

"Okay?" Lily's eyes bugged out at Adam again.

"If it's not okay, what else do you want?" Adam shrugged. "Ted didn't screw up big time, and Erica's not heartbroken. It's just a normal, chill breakup."

Emmm.

Back when Adam introduced Ted to Erica, it was just to distract her so he could deal with her scumbag artist ex.

No kidding—anyone who dared mess with Peggy wasn't getting off easy with Adam around.

That jerk? He'd long been busted for drugs by some "helpful" citizen and was rotting in jail. With that much stash and no connections, he'd be there forever.

Adam figured as long as his people kept an eye out, the world would stay fair enough.

Though, oops—he'd slipped up a bit. To keep it hush-hush and not tip the guy off, he hadn't tossed in a soap-on-a-rope for those prison showers. You know, the kind that doesn't slip?

In TV drama land, that's a jailhouse must-have—users flash a smug grin just owning one.

Anyway, Erica had moved on from that loser, and Ted, the romantic little prince, had nailed his role as the distraction. Now they'd parted on good terms.

What's Adam got to complain about?

"Thanks for understanding, Adam!" Ted said, genuinely grateful for Adam's chill vibe.

If it were him, he'd probably have grumbled a bit, not been this cool about it.

"No problem," Adam said, taking the thanks in stride.

Ring ring!

Ted's phone buzzed.

"Who's that?" Lily snapped, already annoyed. "Don't tell me it's Barney dragging you out to celebrate being single again?"

"Nah," Ted said, staring at the screen in shock. "It's... the Lonely Hearts Club number."

"Lonely Hearts Club?" Lily's eyes widened. "The one that said a few months back you'd never find true love and would die alone?"

"Yup," Ted groaned. "The same one that nearly lost it when I broke their 100% success streak. I had to cheer her up with that cockroach-and-rat love story you guys found, so she'd keep searching for me—for free."

"Did she actually find someone?" Adam perked up, curious.

"Ted, pick it up already!" Lily and Matthew urged.

"Alright," Ted said, taking a deep breath, steadying himself, and answering. "Hello?"

"Hi, I'm looking for Mr. Ted Mosby," a middle-aged man's voice came through.

"That's me," Ted replied.

"Mr. Mosby, hello! How've you been lately?" the man said. "This is Bell Duncan from Lonely Hearts Club..."

"Holy shit!" Adam and Lily blurted out at the same time, hearing the name and that familiar voice.

"Babe, what's up?" Matthew asked, baffled, turning to Lily.

"Nothing!" Lily slapped a hand over her mouth, shaking her head guiltily.

"Wait—Duncan?" Matthew scratched his head, but his focus quickly shifted to Adam.

"Heh," Adam rubbed his forehead with an awkward laugh. "I'll explain in a sec."

"You know him too?" Lily's wild eyes locked onto Adam, sparking a silent convo.

"Of course I do—you do too?" Adam shot back, just as surprised.

"Who is this guy to you two?" Matthew's jealous glare cut in.

Meanwhile...

"...Mr. Mosby, you signed up with Lonely Hearts Club four months ago?"

"Yeah," Ted said with a laugh. "You guys never found what I was looking for."

"That's exactly why I'm calling," Bell Duncan said. "We found her, sir. We found your soulmate."

"What?!" Ted froze, stunned.

"Please come by as soon as you can," Bell urged over the phone.

"Sure," Ted mumbled, hanging up in a daze. "They say they found my soulmate..."

"No way!"

"For real?"

Adam and Lily responded half-heartedly, barely paying attention.

"Enough with that—spill it! What's going on with you two?" Matthew snapped, losing it. "You both know the guy calling Ted?"

"Huh?" Ted couldn't help but glance over.

"Adam, you first!" Matthew demanded, noticing Lily's shifty eyes.

"His last name's Duncan—what do you think?" Adam said with a wry smile.

"He's your relative?" Ted gasped.

"Let's go—I'll head over with you," Adam said, still smirking. "It's been forever since I last saw Uncle Bell. Didn't know he was in New York now."

"Uncle Bell?" Lily, Matthew, and Ted all shouted at once.

"Bell Duncan—my dad Bob Duncan's brother, my real uncle," Adam explained, grinning. "But Lily, how do you know Uncle Bell?"

"Uh..." Lily's face flushed, and she stammered, dodging the question.

"Lily?!" Matthew was getting mad now.

"Don't be upset, babe!" Lily rushed to hug him, finally spilling it. "Remember Scooter?"

"Of course I remember Scooter!" Matthew growled. "What's this got to do with your high school ex?!"

"Remember how we met, and I broke up with Scooter for my dreams?" Lily said with a weak smile. "I told you I didn't want the life he'd custom-planned for me?"

"Uh-huh!" Matthew's face darkened.

"It was literally custom-planned!" Lily admitted, sheepish. "Back at graduation, Scooter was gonna propose. He'd already gotten a ring and a wedding dress—he drove to Chicago with his buddies to get it made by my favorite designer at the time.

"And on that trip, they met Big Bear..."

"Big Bear?" Matthew and Ted turned to Adam.

"My Uncle Bell's nickname," Adam said, his mouth twitching.

"I didn't take Scooter's proposal, even with all that prep, 'cause I didn't love him," Lily said, gazing at Matthew with all the feels. "I only love you, Matthew."

"I love you too, babe," Matthew softened.

"So yeah, I turned Scooter down," Lily shrugged. "But he and his crew ended up tight with Big Bear."

Chapter 639: No Such Thing as a Coincidence

Love Solutions (aka "Singles Terminal")

In the end, the gang decided to roll up together.

"Please come in! You must be Mr. Ted Mosby... Wait, PJ, what are you doing here?"

Inside the office, a guy who looked exactly like Adam's dad, Bob, stood up to greet Ted. But when he spotted Adam, he made a beeline over and wrapped him in a big, enthusiastic hug.

"Uncle Bell, I've been going by Adam for ages now," Adam said with a helpless grin.

"Why'd you change your name?!" Bell Duncan let go, frowning. "Your grandpa gave you that name—PJ's awesome!"

"Isn't 'Adam' cool too? You know, Son of God and all that," Adam quipped.

"Haha!" Bell burst out laughing. Then his eyes swept over Matthew and Lily, and he blinked in surprise. "Lily?"

"Big Bear!" Lily sighed, waving half-heartedly.

"You're friends with Adam?" Bell's eyes widened. "What a coincidence!"

"Yup, small world," Lily said with a wry smile. "Me, Adam, and Ted—we're all tight. Oh, and this is my fiancé, Matthew."

"You're engaged?" Bell gave Matthew a once-over and nodded. "Nice, nice. Way more mature and steady than Scooter."

Matthew flashed a grin.

"Uncle Bell, weren't you in Chicago before?" Adam asked, curious. "When'd you move to New York? And what's with the whole 'Love Solutions' matchmaker gig?"

"Yeah, what happened to Ellen Pierce?" Ted finally chimed in. "Isn't this her company?"

"Just these past couple days," Bell said, gesturing for everyone to sit. "Our company bought out Love Solutions. We're usually in meat and textiles, but the board's geniuses decided we need to 'diversify.' So, here I am."

"Oh, got it," Adam said with a knowing smirk.

It's a classic big-company trap. Hit a growth ceiling, and suddenly they want to be bigger, broader, everything. They dabble in all kinds of businesses, dreaming of monopolizing society itself.

Then the board members can play kingpins, doing whatever they want.

Even Batman's in on it.

Bruce Wayne's family empire practically owns Gotham—still not enough, so he suits up as the Dark Knight, ruling the city's underbelly too, going for the full black-and-white takeover.

Arkham Asylum? Who knows how many Wayne-family haters got tossed in there, labeled "crazy" or "unhinged."

When Batman growls, "My Gotham!"—he's not kidding around. 😊

Bell's company was clearly taking its first step down that road.

He'd mocked the board's "genius" plan, but if it worked? Maybe it was genius.

"Did you find Ted's soulmate?" Lily asked, shaking off the awkwardness.

"Yup," Bell said, handing Ted a file. "Here she is—your perfect match."

Lily snatched it instantly.

"Hold up—500 bucks first," Bell said, glancing at Adam. "Family or not, I've gotta keep the books straight. I'm just a working stiff here."

"Fair enough," Adam nodded.

"Nah, I'll pass," Ted said, waving it off. "Last time you matched me with someone 'perfect,' she was already married."

"This time's different," Bell pitched. "Take a look—guaranteed satisfaction."

"Go for it," Adam grinned. "If you're not happy, I'll cover the cost."

"Let me see! Wow, she's gorgeous!" Lily yanked the file open, and Matthew leaned in as they started reading aloud. "She loves dogs, spent a whole summer in Northern California, plays bass guitar, loves crossword puzzles, and enjoys old movies."

"OMG, Ted, she's your type!" Matthew blurted out.

As Ted's best bud since college, he knew exactly what Ted's dream girl was like.

Ted's eyes were practically sparkling. ✨

"Wait, there's more!" Lily squealed. "Her favorite food's lasagna, she plays tennis, her favorite book's *Love in the Time of Cholera*, and she wants two kids—a boy and a girl!"

"A boy and a girl!!!" Matthew fist-pumped, shouting.

"Okay, set it up!" Ted couldn't hold back anymore. He jumped up, whipped out his credit card, and looked at Bell. "You take credit, right?"

Having a son and a daughter? That was his ultimate partner goal.

"Of course," Bell said, pulling out a POS machine.

One swipe later—bam—500 bucks in the bank. The profit margin here was insane.

Watching Ted actually pay up, Bell thought maybe the board's plan wasn't so nuts after all.

New York's single-and-ready crowd? Their money was too easy to snag! 💰

Once the payment cleared, Bell grinned. "Tomorrow night, 8 PM, at..."

"Old Friends Bar," Adam cut in.

"Old Friends Bar?" Bell blinked.

"It's my place," Adam said with a smile. "Perfect spot for us to check out Ted's 'perfect match.' Uncle, you should swing by sometime too."

"You've got a bar now?" Bell marveled. "You really are the pride of the Duncan family! Me, I'm too old for the wild life anymore."

"You're definitely different from the old days," Adam teased.

Back in the day, Bell was all leather jackets, chains, earrings—dancing like he owned the floor, oozing swagger.

Emmm.

He and Adam's dad, Bob, were cut from the same cloth.

Yup, Bob could dance too—ballet in his past, square dancing in his prime. When he got going, it was... something else.

Adam used to wonder how his mom ever fell for him.

But then again, it made sense.

His mom, Amy, loved the spotlight—dreamed of being a star. She could bust a move with the best of them.

As their kid, Adam often pulled the classic "please stop" face to keep his parents from showing off their dance moves in front of him. 😊

"Alright, Old Friends Bar it is," Bell said with a laugh. "Tomorrow, 8 PM sharp—don't be late."

"Don't worry, we won't let him!" Matthew and Lily said, buzzing with excitement.

As Ted's besties, they'd been sweating his love life forever. Now, with a match this spot-on, they were more hyped than he was.

"I won't be late," Ted promised.

Truth be told, he'd go meet her right now if he could.

But to show up at his best, he'd hold off—skip work tomorrow afternoon, get a haircut, change outfits, and roll up early. No way he'd be tardy.

Good thing he was a project lead now—his schedule was flexible.

"Ted, check her out—she's stunning," Lily said, handing him the file.

Ted took a deep breath, flipped it open, and there she was: a drop-dead gorgeous woman. He couldn't help but mutter her name. "Anna Taylor."

Chapter 640: Barney's Not Allowed In!

The Next Day, Evening

Old Friends Bar

"Ted looks super nervous," Matthew, Lily, and Adam said, sitting together and watching Ted from afar. He was alone, fidgeting and checking his watch every few seconds.

"Hope he doesn't blurt out 'I love you' tonight," Adam teased.

"Fingers crossed," Lily and Matthew said with a helpless chuckle. "If this 'perfect match' gets spooked by that and thinks he's some flaky guy, it'd be such a shame if she just walked out."

"Isn't Ted kinda flaky though?" Adam quipped with a grin.

"Okay, enough picking on him," Lily said, nudging Adam. "Hey, while we've got time, why don't you tell us that bee lovers' story?"

"..." Adam's mouth twitched. "Bee lovers, my ass—it's The Legend of the Condor Heroes!"

"Same diff! Spill it already!" Lily pressed.

"Fine," Adam sighed. He'd promised them, so he launched into his edited version of the story.

The forbidden romance and epic vibes had Matthew and Lily gasping and oohing the whole time.

Soon, it hit 8 p.m.

Ted's "perfect match" finally strutted in, heels clicking.

"She's here," Adam said, spotting her first. He gave her a quick once-over—gorgeous, classy—and paused his storytelling to nudge Matthew and Lily.

"Wow! She's way younger and prettier than her pics!" Lily exclaimed.

"Ted's smitten," Matthew said, clocking his buddy's reaction like a pro.

"Of course he is," Lily giggled. "Even I'm swooning a little!"

"Ahem," Adam coughed. "Lily, can you chill? I know Matthew's cool with it and you're not actually going full-on girl-crush, but tone it down a bit, yeah?"

"Sorry!" Lily grinned sheepishly. "Got carried away. I'll try."

"They're chatting now," Matthew pointed out.

"Ugh, I can't hear what they're saying," Lily whined, craning her neck. "I told you we should've sat right next to them—we'd be in on the action! But nooo, you wouldn't let me."

"Please," Adam groaned. "You're already causing a scene from here. If we were next to them, you think this Anna Taylor wouldn't notice you? Who's on the date—Ted or you?"

"But I wanna know what they're talking about!" Lily huffed.

"Just ask me," Adam said with a smirk. "Lip-reading's not exactly rocket science."

"Then read it already!" Lily demanded.

"They're just small-talking," Adam said, watching their lips from a distance. "Ted's playing up their shared interests to impress her. Man, he's simping hard—like a total puppy."

"It's working, though, right?" Matthew countered.

"Yep," Adam nodded, seeing Ted and Anna cracking up nonstop. "The Lonely Hearts Club's matching system's got some logic to it."

Shared hobbies? If they line up enough, even if romance flops, you've still got a solid friend.

Take Howard and Amy from *The Big Bang Theory*. They barely spoke one-on-one before, and when they teamed up for that scavenger hunt, it was awkward as hell at first.

But their mutual love for Neil Diamond? That broke the ice. They ended up belting out his songs in the car, ditched the game, and hit a bar to sing duets in front of everyone—total blast!

That's *The Big Bang Theory* for you.

In any other show, Adam bet Howard and Amy would've sparked up like crazy.

Honestly, back in his old life watching that, he'd been sweating for Sheldon, terrified the writers would pull some dumb, messy twist.

Don't say it's impossible!

If Howard hadn't met Bernadette, he'd have been wild enough to try anything.

He'd hit on Penny nonstop right in front of Leonard.

He even stuck a pinhole camera in Penny's place once!

If the mood struck, would he turn down Amy?

And Amy? On that work trip with Bernadette, she'd let slip she was kinda into Howard's type too.

Why?

Sheldon was way too passive—wouldn't even play along!

Howard, though? Over-the-top flirty. For someone like Amy, whose hormones were always on edge, that vibe was tempting. Totally normal.

Emmm.

Of course, Bernadette secretly had a thing for cute, dorky Sheldon too—wanted to "teach him a few tricks."

Everyone's got their tastes.

People chase perfection—it's human!

Thankfully, this was *The Big Bang Theory*. After Amy and Bernadette spilled their fleeting crushes, they shut it down and forgot about it.

Otherwise, cue the avalanche of soap-opera nonsense.

"Huh," Adam said, pausing as he read their lips.

"What's up?" Lily pounced.

"Anna's a grade school teacher in town," Adam said, surprised. "Monica's family lives here too."

"A teacher!" Lily's eyes lit up even more. "Grade school teachers are the best!"

She was a preschool teacher herself—she'd totally hit it off with Anna.

With Robin gone, Lily felt like she'd found a new bestie candidate.

"Not bad at all," Matthew agreed.

He'd married a preschool teacher, and if his best bud Ted snagged a grade school one, their kids' early education was set!

"Oh no, trouble," Lily gasped. "Matthew, look!"

"Damn!" Matthew cursed, spotting it too. "It's Barney. He must've heard Ted's meeting his 'perfect match' here and came to mess it up."

Outside the bar's glass window, Barney stood watching Ted and Anna laugh, adjusting his tie with that classic Barney Stinson smirk, heading for the door.

"Don't sweat it," Adam said with a grin. "He's not ruining anything."

"What's your plan?" Lily asked, worried.

"Nothing," Adam said, still smiling.

Matthew and Lily stared at the entrance. Barney swaggered up, oozing charm, and reached to push the door open.

Then—bam!

A huge, buff bouncer blocked him.

Barney argued, clearly pissed, then pulled out cash—\$20, then \$50, finally \$100.

But Franklin's magic failed him.

The bouncer didn't budge, grabbed Barney by the collar, and tossed him out like a ragdoll.

"What the—how?!" Lily yelled. "That makes no sense!"

Normally, at exclusive spots, bouncers secretly took bribes to let people in.

Even flirting worked—Lily once flashed her shirt in public and got waved through, no problem.

Her trick was straight out of Penny's playbook—those skimpy, see-through tops that scored free drinks. Same vibe!

"You blacklisted Barney, didn't you?" Matthew guessed.

The bouncer rejecting cash? Only one explanation: he couldn't take it, or he'd be fired.

Old Friends Bar was open for business—banning someone meant Barney was persona non grata.

"Did I do wrong?" Adam asked, laughing.

"It's kinda shady... but damn, this time you nailed it!" Lily grinned.

Barney showing up would've tanked Ted and Anna's date for sure.

He hated Ted chasing "perfect matches" or "soulmates." He wanted Ted single forever, his eternal wingman tearing up New York's dating scene.