

TV Show 661

Chapter 661 Snake Moves

New York. Hudson Riverfront. Vance-Mutt Hotel.

Matthew and Lily's wedding was going down right here.

"What the heck?!"

As Adam and the crew stepped inside, the first thing they saw in the lobby was a very pregnant woman—super close to popping—sitting by a harp, looking like she was trying way too hard to act like everything was fine.

Being doctors, Adam and Juno zipped over to check on her.

"I'm fine, I'm fine!" the woman said, cradling her huge belly and taking some quick breaths. She flashed a grin. "I've got this!" 😊

"When's your due date?" Adam asked.

"Tuesday," she said, still smiling.

"That's, like, right now. Why are you still here playing the harp?!" Adam blinked, confused.

"Oh, I mean last Tuesday," she clarified with a laugh. "Lily's dad and my dad are best buds, so I couldn't miss her wedding. I'm tougher than I look... oof, whew!"

"..."

Everyone just stared, speechless.

"You should head to the hospital," Juno urged. "Weddings take forever—you're not gonna make it through."

"But Lily already paid me..." the woman hesitated.

"No worries," Adam said, forcing a smile. "I'll sort it out. We'll just say you played. Done deal."

Seriously?!

This lady was risking it all for a paycheck. Talk about screwing over Lily! Imagine the wedding halfway through, and the harpist goes into labor right there. Talk about a "blessed early arrival"—way more dramatic than tossing some peanuts or lotus seeds for good luck! 😊

Even with that, people still say it's all about merit in the U.S., not connections? Please. Connections were smacking them in the face. This wedding wasn't safe from them either!

"Alright then," the woman said, finally giving in with a grin. "Honestly, I'd probably only last half the gig anyway. Plus, with all this happy energy, I might just pop today!"

"Congrats!" Adam said, his smile twitching a little. He waved over a waiter to carefully escort the about-to-burst harpist out.

Then he pulled out his phone to call his assistant, Ada, to find a replacement harpist.

"Forget the harp," Juno cut in. "Lily told me she originally wanted a guitarist, but her dad owed this woman's dad a favor, so they went with her instead."

"Favors, huh?" Adam shook his head.

In the U.S., everything's a transaction. Back when Monica was catering, her mom threw a party and hired her—paid her full price, no discounts. Lily's dad, though? He went all out to repay this favor. No wonder Lily didn't tell him when she caught her mom with that pro athlete.

"I can play," Karen piped up.

"I know," Adam said, already dialing Ada. He grinned at Karen. "You can play, Juno can play, I can play—but we're guests here. We can't just sit there strumming all night. Don't you wanna dance with Juno?"

"Let him handle it," Juno said, playfully tugging Karen's hand.

Adam briefed Ada. Even with the triple-urgent request, she agreed like it was no big deal. Why? She'd handled way too many of Adam's last-minute fixes. Practice makes perfect!

With the most eye-popping issue sorted, they headed toward the bride and groom's dressing rooms—two separate ones, of course. Juno and the girls went into the bride's, and Adam was about to walk off when he spotted a shady-looking guy sneaking in after them. He bolted right back in.

"Hey, Lily!" the guy said, puffing out his chest like he owned the place.

"Scooter? What are you doing here?" Lily asked, her face dropping mid-hug with Juno and the girls.

"It's not Scooter anymore," he said, strutting forward with a swagger that screamed "I don't care who's watching." He got close to Lily. "It's Bill now. A lot's changed, but one thing never will—I still love you. I'm here to win you back."

"Ha! You're kidding, right?" Lily couldn't help but laugh.

Eight years since high school graduation, eight years since they broke up, zero contact—and now her ex pulls this? It was hilarious... until she saw he wasn't laughing. Then her smile faded.

She did not need this soap opera nonsense on her big day with Matthew. Sure, Matthew wouldn't doubt her, but he was a jealousy volcano. If he found out Scooter—sorry, "Bill"—was pulling this stunt, it'd ruin his mood for sure.

"Lily, I know it's wild, but I love you," Scooter went on, oblivious to her panic. He struck a dramatic pose, reciting like it was poetry night. "If you can look me in the eyes and tell me you want to marry Matthew, I'll walk out right now and never step into your life again!"

He waved his arms for emphasis.

"I want—" Lily started, practically jumping at the chance.

But then Scooter's neck twisted like a snake—whoosh!

"I want—" Lily tried again, desperate to lock eyes and shut him down for good.

No dice. Scooter was pulling some next-level snake-move dodges, weaving his head like a pro. Swerve! Twist! No eye contact for her!

Adam couldn't take it anymore. He stepped up, grabbed Scooter's head, and held it still. No more slithering away!

"Let me go!" Scooter squirmed, trying to break free.

Yeah, right. His strength was no match for Adam.

"Go ahead, Lily," Adam said with a grin, pinning Scooter in place.

"Sweet!" Lily beamed.

But even then, Scooter wouldn't quit. "Oh, you've got my head? Fine—my eyes can still move!" Cue the wild cross-eyed routine, darting every which way. Lily didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"Say it quick, or I'm tossing him out," Adam said, chuckling at Scooter's ridiculous eye antics.

"Scooter, I want to marry Matthew. Only Matthew," Lily said firmly. "Can you stop? Our families are cool with each other—I don't want this getting messy."

"What? Didn't hear you," Scooter said, playing dumb like his life depended on it.

"Alright, that's it," Adam said, hoisting Scooter up and heading for the door. "I heard her. That's enough."

"I heard Barney say Scooter's here!" one of Matthew's law school buddies—and a groomsman—rushed in. "I'll take care of it!"

Groomsmen are there to handle wedding chaos, and chasing off an ex? Top priority. This was supposed to be Barney's job, but—shocker—he'd ditched it to flirt with some guests, leaving Scooter to waltz right in.

"Nah, I've got this," Adam said, still holding Scooter. He eyed the slightly unreliable groomsman. "You go check on Matthew—see if he needs anything."

"Got it!" The groomsman, a Columbia Law alum like Adam, shot Scooter a glare and marched off.

"Keep an eye on him—don't let him back in," Adam said to the waiter at the door, still gripping Scooter. "Bride's orders."

"Yes, sir!" the waiter replied instantly.

He didn't care what the bride said—Adam's generous tip from earlier had already won him over. 🌍

Chapter 662: God Punishes, Adam Blesses

New York.

Hudson Riverfront.

Vansmoot Hotel.

Groom's Dressing Room.

"Pfft!"

Adam dealt with the troublemaker Scooter and pushed open the door. One look inside, and he couldn't hold back a laugh. "Matthew, what's going on with you?" 😊

"I'd love to know what's going on with me!"

Matthew—whose hair was now split down the middle with a bald streak shaved right through it—yelled in a total meltdown.

"What happened?"

Adam bit back his grin, trying to sound serious.

"Lily's cousin is in beauty school. Lily didn't want her messing with her hair, so she sent her over to torture me instead," Matthew ranted. "And now I've got this hideous haircut..."

"She just grabbed a clipper and did that to you?"

Adam's jaw dropped.

"Nope," said Ted, the best man, rubbing his hands awkwardly. "We were debating how bad the haircut was when Matthew flipped out, grabbed the clipper, and did this to himself. I couldn't stop him in time!"

"So what do I do now?!"

Matthew screeched, still freaking out.

"Chill out," Adam said, calming him down. "Maybe your love with Lily is just too sweet and perfect. Even God's like, 'Nah, I gotta mess with them at the wedding.' Think of it as a little test.

But don't worry—I've got your back.

It's just a half-bald head.

Slap on a wig or a hat, and we're golden!"

"Really?"

Matthew squinted, skeptical.

"Trust me, it's fine," Adam grinned. "Lily's marrying you, not your hair."

"Yeah," Ted chimed in. "You two are so lovey-dovey you've even had farting contests. This is nothing!"

"That was your idea!" Matthew snapped at Ted. "If I hadn't gotten carried away with you, I never would've started that with Lily!"

"Hey, we're bros—farting contests are fair game," Ted said, half-laughing, half-crying. "I'm not the one marrying you!"

"So you're saying I can't marry Lily now?"

Matthew shot back.

Clearly, even the super-nice Matthew had caught a bad case of pre-wedding jitters.

"Of course you can!"

Adam was fighting hard not to burst out laughing. He forced a smile and said, "You two are the sweetest couple ever, soon-to-be the sweetest husband and wife. A little farting contest? That's just your quirky charm! ...Though, uh, maybe keep it behind closed doors."

Hmm... and crack a window.

Ted kept dropping not-so-subtle hints about a wig, pointing to Matthew's half-bald uncle who'd rocked a fake hairpiece for years. After staring at the uncle's head way too long, the guy finally gave up his wig—though it wasn't much help. Adam grabbed a hat instead.

In the end, Matthew went with the hat. The uncle's wig was a disaster—covering only the front half, leaving the back totally exposed. What was the guy thinking? It was like he cared about his head but forgot his... well, you get it. 😊

Once Matthew was sorted, Adam slipped out. He couldn't stick around—if another weird thing happened, he'd lose it laughing, and that'd be way too rude when the groom was already stressing.

"How's Lily holding up?"

He ran into Juno outside.

"Don't even ask," Juno chuckled. "Lily's having the worst luck today. First the veil got dirty, then she lost her custom wedding panties."

"Custom wedding panties?"

Adam raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah," Juno grinned. "The ones that say 'Property of Matthew Erickson's Exclusive Butt.' How else will people know if she doesn't wear them?"

"..."

Adam's mouth twitched.

With a white wedding dress that's prone to flashing, those panties would definitely scream "Matthew's territory" loud and clear. But, uh... isn't that a bit much? 🙄

"She didn't toss them on purpose, did she?"

Adam figured he'd cracked the case.

"Nope," Juno shook her head. "Lily's totally into the idea. You should've seen her freaking out to find them—those emotions don't lie."

"Then just make another pair," Adam shrugged. "I know Matthew's handwriting. Grab some new wedding panties, and I'll write it."

"Good call!"

Juno's eyes lit up.

Adam followed her to the bride's dressing room, calmed a frazzled Lily down, and asked her to describe the design, size, and color. He pictured it in his head, then scribbled it onto a fresh pair of wedding panties.

"That's it! Wow, it's identical!"

Lily snatched them up, squealing with joy. "Adam, you're amazing!"

"Heh," Adam laughed. "So, Lily, don't stress. Whatever goes wrong, just holler. You and Matthew's wedding? It's gonna go off without a hitch."

"Mm-hmm!"

Lily nodded like a bobblehead.

"You should do a sweep," Juno suggested. "Check if anything else needs fixing before the ceremony starts. Better to catch it now than deal with a mess later."

"Smart idea," Adam agreed.

Seriously, how long had it been, and the bride and groom were already drowning in chaos? Maybe their love was too smooth and sweet—even single God upstairs was jealous and throwing curveballs.

If Adam didn't step in to squash these hiccups, Matthew and Lily might end up with regrets on their big day.

He left the bride's room and checked out the main hall. The wedding was about to kick off, and all the guests had arrived.

Lily's dream of a cozy 20-30 person affair? Yeah, that ballooned to over a hundred thanks to both families' networks.

Barney, the best man who was supposed to be helping Matthew, was instead cruising around with a drink, hitting on the ladies. "Can I get your number?" he'd ask. When they said no, he'd add, "It's for the bride!" and smirk as some eagerly handed over their digits.

Adam locked eyes with him—cold, unimpressed, and a little judgy. Barney quickly looked away and slinked off. After getting tossed out of bars a few times, he knew Adam wasn't messing around.

"Ahh!"

A woman's pained cry cut through the chatter.

"God, Gretchen, what happened?" someone asked, concerned.

Adam hurried over. A woman—Gretchen—was clutching her hand in agony. A shattered cup lay on the floor, hot water pooling around it. He parted the crowd. "I'm a doctor. Let me take a look."

"It hurts so much!" Gretchen groaned. "God, the bar exam's in a few weeks—I was totally ready, and now this?!"

"It's okay," Adam said after checking her hand. "The burn's not too bad. I patched it up a bit, and it'll heal fast. Won't mess up your exam."

"It won't?"

Gretchen blinked, stunned.

Adam felt a spark of intuition and gave her a deep look. "Nope. I'm Adam Duncan, Matthew and Lily's friend. You are...?"

"Gretchen Hans," she said with a forced smile. "Matthew's senior from school."

Adam glanced around—yep, a bunch of Columbia Law folks. He nodded. "It's Matthew and Lily's wedding, so I can't step away. Your burn needs attention now, though. Should I call you a car?"

"I can tough it out. I'd rather stay for the wedding," Gretchen said, forcing another smile.

"Better not," Adam said with a half-smile. "You don't want a scar, right? And if it gets worse later, you really won't be taking that bar exam."

You've worked too hard for this—career first. Matthew and Lily will get it. They'd feel awful if you stuck around and got hurt worse. You don't want them carrying that guilt, do you?"

"Fine," Gretchen muttered, dropping her gaze, avoiding his eyes.

Chapter 663 Hitting Is Caring, Scolding Is Love!

New York. Hudson Riverfront. Vance-Mutt Hotel. Wedding Venue.

"I'll walk you out," Adam said with a smile, gesturing toward the door.

"Tell Matthew I'm sorry for me," Gretchen said to the group of younger law school students.

"Mm-hmm," they mumbled back. The guys barely reacted, while the girls huddled together, whispering and ignoring her.

Adam was now 80-90% sure of his hunch. These law students weren't exactly the warm-and-fuzzy type. Not a single one of them was some naive pushover. Law school drilled them to connect theory to real-life cases—classes were never dull. The professors were smooth talkers, spinning wild, worldview-shattering true stories that kept everyone hooked.

The endgame? To churn out sharp minds in slick suits, brainstorming like mad and dancing on the edge of the law. Doze off in class, and you'd end up like some bumbling lawyer, screwing over your clients—or worse, landing yourself behind bars, sweating buckets with a bunch of tough guys eyeing you.

Even as second-year grad students, these kids had eagle eyes. They could spot motives a mile away, always assuming the worst about people's actions. Exaggerate a bit, and they were like Batman in the Dark Knight—hundreds of contingency plans in the Batcomputer for foes and friends alike. Total pros!

Well... minus the "destroy yourself" plan, anyway.

Novelists couldn't dream up plots as wild as their minds. Writers had to worry about logic; these guys didn't. Real life handed them endless bizarre, magical cases on a platter. Like that old writer Zhou Shuren said about *Dream of the Red Chamber*: "It's real, so it feels fresh"—a timeless masterpiece. Or take that lawless internet star who gained millions of followers in months. Who else could pull that off?

As Adam escorted Gretchen out of the hotel, he grinned and said, "I'm a Columbia alum too. What year did you graduate, senior?"

"Class of '98," Gretchen muttered, her voice low.

"Oh, nice," Adam nodded. "Three years ahead of Matthew. I think the bar exam's twice a year—how many times have you taken it since graduating?"

"...Twice. About to go for a third," Gretchen said, her body tensing. "I wasn't ready the first two times, but I'm really ready now. I'll pass this time, I swear."

"I believe you," Adam said with a noncommittal smile.

"I will pass," she insisted, avoiding his gaze and staring at the ground. "My head's full of tort law, property law, and constitutional stuff right now. I can't focus on anything else."

"Totally get it," Adam nodded. "Just... try to be more careful, okay? Don't accidentally hurt your hand again. You know I'm a med school grad—I can tell your hand's been injured before, maybe a few months back. If I'm not mistaken, the bar exam's in February and July..."

"No, it's not what you think!" Gretchen suddenly shouted, cutting him off. "You've got it wrong! I hurt it in March!"

"Okay, okay," Adam shrugged, keeping it chill. "No need to get worked up, senior. I didn't mean anything by it. I just get how it feels—everyone's got high expectations, and failing over and over piles on the pressure. It's normal to wanna dodge it sometimes."

"You've felt that too?" Gretchen looked at him, stunned.

"Yup," Adam nodded.

In this life, with his cheat codes, not so much. But in his past life? Oh, he'd been there.

"How'd you deal with it?" she asked, eyes full of hope.

"Shift your mindset," Adam said seriously. "Don't live for other people's eyes—live for yourself. Do your best, but don't beat yourself up or hurt yourself. And definitely don't hurt anyone else. Hey, what do you think of Matthew and Lily as a couple?"

"..." Gretchen's face turned bright red.

Bingo. Adam had it all figured out now.

This senior wasn't just crumbling under the pressure of failing the bar exam multiple times, hurting herself to escape. She had a thing for Matthew too. Injuring her hand now? Two birds, one stone.

Was it because she couldn't stand seeing Matthew and Lily's sweet wedding and wanted to bail again? Or was it a spiteful jab to mess with Lily? Hard to say.

"I just needed an excuse," Gretchen mumbled, ashamed.

"It's all good," Adam said after a moment, smiling. "I'm sure you'll find your own someone too. Get past this hump, and the world'll brighten up again. You made it into Columbia Law—smarts aren't your problem. Maybe it's just your headspace.

Lots of people crack right before the big test. Could be you're one of them. If the pressure's too much, step back, try a different job—no big deal. There are a million paths out there, and everyone's got options. Just don't go down the dark road of hurting yourself or others."

He could tell she really liked Matthew. Fair enough—future "Marshmallow Justice," the loyal giant teddy bear? Guy was a catch. If he hadn't locked it down with Lily, he'd be swimming in admirers. No one wanting him would've been the real shocker!

But Adam also figured Gretchen wasn't some scheming mean girl trying to sabotage Lily. She'd just gotten too good at running away, aiming for a double win: skip the heartbreaking wedding and set up an excuse to dodge the bar exam in a few weeks by "accidentally" getting hurt in front of everyone.

If she were truly vicious, she'd have passed the bar ages ago and wouldn't even flinch at Adam's words. So, he decided to give her a gentle nudge.

From his past life's experiences and this life's wisdom, he knew a kind hand could sometimes save a life. If more people offered that, fewer would spiral to extremes. Often, all someone needed was a wake-up slap—figuratively, of course. The kind of "hit" that left the person and the onlookers touched. That's real "hitting is caring, scolding is love"! 😊

"Thanks," Gretchen said, genuinely moved.

It was 1999—no flood of cheesy motivational quotes yet. She bought Adam's advice hook, line, and sinker—no knee-jerk "ugh, self-help nonsense" reaction here. She was legit grateful.

Out of the corner of his eye, Adam spotted Lily's high school ex, Scooter, still circling the hotel, looking for a way to sneak back in. The waiter, though, was on him like glue, sticking to Adam's orders to keep him out and save the wedding.

"Scooter! Over here!" Adam waved him over.

Scooter didn't wanna come, but the waiter gave him a little shove, and over he trudged.

"What?" Scooter grumbled, sulking.

"Do me a favor," Adam said with a grin. "Take my senior here to the medical center to get her hand checked out."

"No, it's fine—I can go myself," Gretchen said, embarrassed.

"He's got nothing better to do," Adam laughed. "You two can chat about Matthew and Lily. Might hit it off!"

"I—" Scooter started to protest.

One look from Adam, and he caved. Guy was a goofy clown—showed up to "steal the bride" but had to ask the groom's best man how it's done. Pre-ceremony or post-ceremony? Snake moves, cross-eyes, spinning in circles—he was more comic relief than rival!

"Fine," Scooter muttered, defeated.

Adam flagged down a cab, watched them climb in, and waved as they drove off. One crushing on Lily, the other on Matthew—neither bad people. Sending them off together? Who knows, maybe sparks would fly. That'd be a good deed in the books! 😊

"Nice work. Keep an eye out—don't let him circle back," Adam said, slipping the waiter a Benjamin.

"Yes, sir!" The waiter beamed like he'd won the lottery. "Thank you, sir!"

Chapter 664: Harmony Like a Lute and Harp

New York.

Hudson Riverfront.

Vansmoot Hotel.

Wedding Venue.

Adam kept playing troubleshoot, and finally, the wedding went off just as Lily and Matthew had dreamed—smooth and perfect.

The ring exchange, the "I do's," all that sweet stuff? Already done in the castle-style hotel's chapel. Now it was time for the reception!

"Ladies and gentlemen—first time saying it this way—let's give a warm welcome to Mr. and Mrs. Matthew Erickson and Lily Aldrin!"

With the emcee's gesture, the newlyweds stepped into the banquet hall hand in hand. Matthew rocked his hat, while Lily's wedding dress faintly revealed red lettering underneath: "Matthew Erickson Exclusive!"

"Why don't they have the same last name?"

Tatiana tilted her head, curious. She was pretty sure her own parents shared a surname.

"That's your Aunt Lily's choice," Adam explained gently. "Even though she's marrying your Uncle Matthew, it doesn't mean she's just tagging along with him. She wants them to be equals.

Instead of taking his last name like most people do, she'd rather keep her own—or maybe they could even create a new family name together, something fresh to mark their new start."

In both Eastern and Western traditions, brides often take their husband's name. But back in the East, that custom's long been ditched. Over here in the West, though? Still going strong, accepted by most.

The devil's in the details, right? Who's more progressive? Easy to see.

And yeah, a few companies don't exactly stack up to a whole civilization when it comes to class!

"Ohh."

Tatiana nodded, half-getting it, then her eyes lit up. She pointed at Matthew and Lily, who'd just started their first dance. "Uncle Adam, they're dancing! Dancing!"

"My little princess, may I have the honor of a dance?"

Adam stood, bowing with a playful flourish.

"Yes!"

Tatiana giggled like crazy.

Adam took her hand and led her to the open dance area up front. A few other couples had already joined in, swaying around Matthew and Lily.

"Step on my feet—I'll guide you," Adam said, letting Tatiana stand on his shoes. It gave her a little height boost and let him lead her along.

At her age, no way she could dance on her own yet!

"Hehe!"

Tatiana didn't mind one bit. She happily perched on his feet, letting him steer her through the moves.

When the song ended...

"Uncle Adam, go dance with Mommy now!"

Tatiana turned down his offer for another spin and tugged him over to Heather, who was chatting with Juno and Karen. She plopped Adam's hand into Heather's.

Adam led Heather onto the dance floor.

"How've you been lately?"

He held her close, swaying to the music, locking eyes with her stunning light blue gaze. Seeing the affection and trust there, he couldn't help but soften his voice.

"Everything's good. With Tatiana around, my mom's got a new focus besides smoking and drinking. She's in way better spirits—everything's just... better," Heather said quietly. "I just miss you a little."

Sigh.

Adam felt her arms tighten around him instinctively, and his heart sighed too.

Drunk on wine, I once whipped a famous steed; I feared too much love would burden a beauty.

This was the real deal—love weighing heavy on a beauty.

Heather wasn't like Robin and the others, able to walk away carefree. In her unique world, Adam had become her anchor, her sunshine.

"How about you come visit more often?" Adam suggested gently. "Maybe two days a week?"

"Sounds perfect!"

Heather's face bloomed into a smile. "With Juno around, my mom and the others don't need me 24/7 anymore. But I can't be gone too long either—two days is just right. Juno suggested the same thing. Did she mention it to you?"

"..."

Adam's mouth twitched. "Nope, I came up with it myself... What else did she say?"

"She said Monday to Friday works best," Heather said, glancing at him. "Pick any two days. I could bring Tatiana along. You're at work during the day, so I'd take her around to study and play."

"Ahem," Adam coughed lightly. "Who's teaching Tatiana now?"

"I hired a private tutor—a woman who comes to the house," Heather smiled. "I pitch in and teach her sometimes too."

Adam nodded, staying quiet.

Tatiana was born with HIV, so sending her to school wasn't simple. Adam and the others had enough medical know-how to avoid transmission and adored the sweet girl enough to treat her normally.

But other kids and their parents? Not so much. Why take the risk when they could just avoid her altogether?

So, home-schooling it was.

"She needs friends," Adam said after a moment. "I might know someone she'd hit it off with."

"Who?"

Heather's curiosity piqued.

"A super-powered girl named Megan..."

Adam filled her in. "Megan's an orphan too—adopted, with a big heart and a strong sense of justice. Right now, she's under Sheldon's 'good habits' training.

Their stories are similar, they're close in age, and both struggle to fit in. They'd make awesome friends! They could chat on the phone, hang out for a couple days a week—wouldn't that be great?"

"Yes!"

Heather's eyes sparkled. "I've been stressing about Tatiana's friend situation. Kids at places like Sunshine House have similar struggles, but since I adopted her, they might not want to play with her. I'm worried she'd get picked on."

Take Megan—orphange kids grow up fast, forced to mature early. But not all of them are as kind-hearted as her. Truth is, girls like Megan are rare.

Most would just envy Tatiana's happy new life, and without adults watching, they'd probably bully her.

Megan can go to school and mingle fine, but with Sheldon's habits kicking in—teaching her self-defense and caution—she won't exactly blend in either. Once those habits stick, though, she'd be a safe bet to hang out with Tatiana.

The more Adam thought about it, the more perfect it seemed.

"But would Megan's parents be okay with it?"

Heather was thrilled but still a little nervous. Tatiana's condition? Even with precautions, most people wouldn't risk it.

"They're good people," Adam smiled. "They didn't ditch Megan when they learned about her situation. Trust me, I'll talk them into it."

"Okay," Heather nodded. "I trust you. Tatiana's gonna flip when she hears this!"

"Don't tell her yet," Adam cautioned. "Let me lock it down first. Then we'll surprise her with the good news. Things can change, you know—no guarantees."

"Got it," Heather said, tilting her head up to gaze at him tenderly. Her soft "yes" melted his heart.

Oof. Adam felt a warm rush.

No rush, though.

Youth fades fast, so seize the day—that's for other people. For Adam and Heather, who might stay eighteen forever, their youthful golden days stretched out long and bright ahead. 😊

Chapter 665: Fruit Hard Candy Returns

Wansmut Hotel. At the wedding banquet. After a few dances.

"Adam, help us out here!" 😊

Lily and Matthew approached with forced smiles, their voices low but practically screaming with frustration.

"What's wrong?"

Adam reluctantly let go of Heather, whose killer curves he'd been holding onto.

"We're starving!"


Lily snapped, "We had the hotel prepare tons of delicious food, but we haven't even had a bite!"

"We haven't eaten all day," Matthew chimed in. "Every time we try to grab something, friends or family pull us aside, and then it's just cocktail after cocktail." 🍸

"If I hadn't stopped him," Lily added, "Matthew would've grabbed food off a napkin some kid spat out while chatting with someone."

Her words painted a grim picture of their current crisis.

"Alright, I'll sort it out for you," Adam said, noticing how shaky they both looked. They were clearly beyond hungry. He quickly moved to guide them toward some food.

Lily, the bride, was hit hardest. Her eyes had that wild, almost possessed look from sheer hunger. No surprise there—much like actresses on the red carpet who skip food, water, and bathroom breaks to fit into their gowns, Lily had gone all out for her stunning wedding dress. 

"You guys are here!"

They'd barely taken two steps when someone called out.

"Grandma!"

Lily and Matthew groaned with weak smiles.

"Sweetheart, you look gorgeous!"

Grandma beamed at Lily in her wedding dress, then turned to Matthew. "And you! You're like a movie star from the '40s."

"You look like a roasted lamb chop sprinkled with pepper and served with mint jelly..." Matthew mumbled, his mind clearly drifting.

"Okay!" Adam cut in, clapping his hands. "Let's get some food, huh?"

Ignoring Grandma's puzzled yet delighted expression as she patted herself down, Adam dragged Matthew away before things got weird.

They sat down, and Adam waved a waiter over. The guy jogged up, nodded eagerly at Adam's instructions, and bolted off. Soon, plates of mouthwatering food were set in front of Matthew and Lily.

"Dig in!" Adam grinned.

"Oh my gosh, finally!"

Matthew and Lily were practically tearing up, hands itching to grab the food and scarf it down.

Then—ding ding ding!

The clinking of forks on glasses rang out, followed by the crowd's cheers: "Kiss! Kiss!"

Matthew and Lily froze, exchanging a helpless look. Under the spotlight, they couldn't just ignore it and chow down. With a quick glance at each other, they leaned in for a fast kiss to get it over with.

But mid-kiss, a waiter swooped in, reaching to clear their plates!

Adam's hand shot out, stopping him. "Who told you to take those?" he asked, eyeing the guy sharply.

"There are only these two plates left on the table," the waiter stammered. "Everyone else is done, so I thought..."

"New guy?" Adam raised an eyebrow.

"Uh, yeah," the waiter nodded sheepishly.

"Alright, we've got this covered," Adam said, waving him off. Another waiter, who'd been keeping an eye on things, hurried over and pulled the newbie away.

"Thank God!"

As the cheers died down, Matthew and Lily broke apart, immediately checking their plates. "They're still here!" they cried out in unison, pure joy in their voices. 🥳🍴

"Go on, eat!" Adam laughed.

"Mmm, yes!"

They grabbed their forks and knives, ready to dig in.

"Lily! Matthew!"

Of course, someone else popped up, showering them with blessings.

They shot Adam a desperate look, practically on the verge of tears.

"How about this?" Juno piped up with a grin. "The instruments are over there. Let's play a song, draw everyone's attention, and give them a chance to eat in peace. Fruit Hard Candy hasn't jammed together in ages!" 🎸

"Fruit Hard Candy is just you and me..." Adam started, but then he caught Juno's confident smirk and followed her gaze to Karen and Heather.

"I'll take the keyboard," Karen said coolly. 🎹

"I can handle the drums!" Heather added with a smile. 🥁

"See? We've got a full crew!" Juno laughed.

"Alright, fine," Adam said, giving Juno a weird look. "But what do we play?"

"Anything's good," Juno replied, her smile widening. "Though I'd say go with your big hit, Don't Cry. You pick!"

"Don't Cry?" Adam hesitated. "That doesn't really fit a wedding vibe."

"That's the point," Juno explained. "We're here to steal the spotlight. If we play something too wedding-y, people will still focus on the bride and groom. Plus, we all know Don't Cry inside out."

"Yeah!" Heather nodded. "We've sung it together a million times."

"Fair enough," Adam sighed. Juno clearly had this planned, so he just went along with it. "Ted, we'll take the stage and grab everyone's attention. You make sure Matthew and Lily eat, okay?"

He gave Ted a quick heads-up, then led Juno and the others to the stage.

"I'm in too!" Tatiana shouted, raising her hand.

"You can dance up there," Juno said, pulling her along. "Just move however you want!"

A super cute kid with killer looks like Tatiana? She could flail around any way and still charm the crowd—no technique needed! 😊

Once Adam and the gang hit the small stage, all eyes were on them. Hard not to be—they were a ridiculously good-looking bunch.

Adam didn't bother with any grand speech. Juno grabbed her bass, Karen settled at the keyboard, Heather took the drums, and Tatiana stood in front of Adam. With a quick nod to Juno, he strummed his guitar and started singing.

The pros showed their stuff right away. Juno, a core member of the original Fruit Hard Candy, hadn't played with Adam in years but still synced with him perfectly. What shocked Adam, though, was how seamlessly Karen on keys and Heather on drums fit in. They'd clearly done this before—Juno must've been the glue holding it together. The revived Fruit Hard Candy was smooth as butter, no awkwardness at all.

Back in the day, Adam had a decent voice and solid skills, but his fame came mostly from tweaking classic songs. Eight years later, after seeing life, death, and all sorts of wild stuff, he'd gained a deeper take on emotions. Singing those old tunes now, his perspective had totally shifted.

A song reflects the heart. Singing with real feeling versus just tossing out lyrics for the sake of it? Night and day.

With their stunning looks and Adam's next-level performance, the group blew everyone away, pulling every single gaze.

Well... almost everyone.

Matthew and Lily, still starving, weren't exactly captivated. Earlier, Matthew had yelled, "Where's my pepper-sprinkled roast lamb? You should be here with me on my wedding night!"

Lily, fighting her own hunger, tried to comfort him. "Don't be sad, you've still got me."

Matthew just shrugged. "Yeah, okay."

Lily's glare could've killed. If she weren't so drained and surrounded by people, she might've ripped him apart right there.

Now, finally free to eat, no performance—however epic—could top the roast lamb in front of them.

"So good, oh my gosh!"

"Smells amazing!"

While Adam and the crew rocked the stage, Matthew and Lily dove into their food like it was the best thing they'd ever tasted.

Chapter 666: People Laugh at Me for Being Too Crazy

Wansmut Hotel.

As Adam and his crew from the New Fruit Candy Band rocked the stage with their first big hit, the real stars of the wedding—Matthew and Lily—finally got a chance to grab a bite of something hot down below.

"Play another one!"

"Encore!"

"One more!"

When Adam finished his song and saw Matthew and Lily happily munching away, he was about to step offstage. But to his surprise, the guests were even more hyped than they'd been earlier when they were teasing the bride and groom!

"Another one?" Adam glanced at Juno.

"Let's do it!" Juno slung her bass over her shoulder, raising an eyebrow. "How about something fitting this time? Maybe Green Day's Time of Your Life?"

That song, Good Riddance (Time of Your Life), was from Green Day's breakout album a couple of years back. With its melody full of blessings for people at life's turning points, it had slowly become a go-to wedding tune these past few years—super on-point for the occasion! Years from now, it might even be considered one of those cheesy, overplayed wedding classics. But that just proves how timeless it is. And right now? Still totally trendy! 🤩

"Alright, let's go for it!" Adam was pumped.

Music has this infectious energy—it lifts everyone up, including yourself. Adam was definitely feeling the vibe now. And it wasn't just him! Juno was glowing, Karen's keyboard was flowing like magic, Heather was killing it on the drums, and little angel Tatiana? Her freestyle moves had the crowd absolutely stunned.

"What in the world is this godly lineup?!"

"With looks and talent like that, why aren't they debuting professionally?!"

Ted opened his mouth to say something but couldn't find the words.

"Too wild... just too wild..."

Matthew, now full and no longer starving, was equally floored. Yup, both he and Lily were music buffs too! I mean, what main character in an American TV show doesn't love music? Who doesn't know a few instruments?

Ted could play piano and guitar. Matthew rocked guitar and drums—he'd even dreamed of starting a band with his future sons. Barney the playboy? Piano, guitar, and trumpet. Lily? Violin and French horn. But they were all just hobbyists, dabbling here and there.

Who'd have thought Adam and his crew would be this pro, with stage presence that hit like a tidal wave?! Ted and Matthew felt like that guy from Shaolin Soccer—you know, the one who almost screams, "In this moment, I'm about to explode!" 😄

Sadly, the fire in their eyes never quite ignited. They didn't have that dramatic, over-the-top flair—like bathing in public and striking a sultry pose with half their pants down. So, Ted and the gang just watched in awe from below, never quite mustering the guts to jump onstage and join in.

Song after song, the reborn New Fruit Candy Band pushed the wedding vibes to the max. The guests didn't want to leave, and even the bride and groom—who were supposed to head straight to their honeymoon—couldn't tear themselves away!

Eventually, the limo driver waiting outside got fed up. He'd been pacing around forever, worried the newlyweds would miss their flight, so he marched in to hurry them along. That finally put an end to the spontaneous party.

Matthew and Lily left reluctantly. Adam, despite the crowd begging for more, called it a night, still buzzing from the high. Even Tatiana was wiped out from freestyling. Adam caught the urgency in Heather's eyes—she clearly wanted to get Tatiana home to rest.

Mother-daughter bond, huh? That's how it goes.

The wedding finally wrapped up. Adam drove Juno and the gang home. Inside the car, Tatiana was still humming the songs, and Adam and the others chimed in now and then. It was all warm and cozy vibes.



"Whoa!"

As they neared the apartment, Adam's eyes narrowed, and he let out a surprised grunt.

"What's up?" Juno, in the passenger seat, turned to look at him.

"Hospital colleague."

Adam pulled the car to the side, unbuckled his seatbelt, and hopped out. "I'll check it out. Juno, you guys stay safe, okay?"

"Be careful!" Juno and the others called out, worried.

"Got it!" Adam shut the door, waved them off, and scanned the traffic. Spotting a figure in a white coat stumbling through the cars, he shouted, "Dr. Svedik! You okay?!"

"I'm fine! I'm better than fine!"

Dr. Dave Svedik—psychiatrist from the medical center and boyfriend of ER doc Susan Lewis—staggered through the traffic. Hearing Adam, he threw his arms wide and laughed. "I've never felt this good! Woo-hoo!"

"Shit!" Adam saw a car nearly clip him, but Svedik didn't even flinch. He instantly pieced it together.

Lu Xun once said, "When you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes back." Psychiatrists who dive deep into their patients' minds often end up with issues of their own. Dr. Svedik was a bit of a name in the field, and now it looked like the abyss had locked eyes with him.

Adam scanned the traffic, did some quick mental math, then darted in. He grabbed the still-laughing Svedik and hauled him out of the chaos.

"Dr. Svedik, what happened?" Adam asked gently once they were safely on the sidewalk.

"You don't know?" Svedik looked shocked, then pointed at a fancy apartment building nearby, giggling like a maniac. "Look!"

Adam followed his finger and froze. A figure spread their arms and leaped from the roof. Then—gunshots rang out from that direction.

Thud! Bang!

Svedik mimicked the sound of a body hitting the ground, then pointed a finger-gun at his temple and pulled the trigger with a "pow!"

"What the hell's going on?" Adam's face turned serious. This wasn't just Svedik losing it—people were killing themselves left and right.

"Liars! All liars!" Svedik cackled. "He fooled all of New York—the whole world! Tonight, New York's gonna light up with a bloody fireworks show. Isn't that hilarious? Haha!"

"Who's the liar?" Adam grabbed Svedik's shoulders, shaking him. "Spit it out!"

"Martin Channing!" Svedik grinned. "He tricked the world! Tonight, thousands of New Yorkers are gonna lose everything because of him—heart attacks, rooftop dives, bullets to the head. They won't be lonely on their way out!"

He raised his arms toward the traffic again and roared, "We're all the same! Let's welcome the storm together!"

And that was it.

Adam wasn't having it. He yanked Svedik back from jumping into traffic and turned to Juno. "Drive them home. I'm taking him to the hospital."

"Got it," Juno replied. They all understood what was happening—no need to argue.

"Oh, one more thing!" Adam, still holding the giggling Svedik, paused and looked back. "Juno, on your way home, keep an eye above you—watch out for jumpers. Don't get hit. Once you're inside, stay put. No peeking out the windows either—stray bullets could be flying."

"Don't worry, we'll be fine," Juno nodded.

Adam gave a few more warnings before he felt okay leaving. After all, their neighborhood was super upscale—full of rich folks. And tonight, Martin Channing, father of Caroline Channing, was about to become the ultimate destroyer.

Dr. Svedik, being a doctor, had probably saved up a decent chunk of cash over the years—only to get suckered into this mess. As a psychiatrist, he'd already been carrying a ton of emotional baggage. With his mental state stretched thin and his temper on edge, this "back to square one" disaster must've snapped him completely.

Chapter 667: So Poor They Don't Even Have Money Left

Medical Center.

Adam arrived at the hospital in a taxi, dragging along a completely unhinged Dr. Svedik.

"What happened?"

Dr. Susan Lewis, who'd been scribbling patient charts at the nurse's station, looked up and hurried over.

"...He needs to be admitted to psych for special care," Adam explained, filling her in with a gentle warning.

"How did this happen...?"

Susan stared at her boyfriend, who was giggling like a fool, and froze in shock.

Adam gave her a sympathetic glance. Poor Susan—stuck with a trainwreck of a sister and now a boyfriend like this. She was such a kind, good-hearted person; why did life keep throwing her curveballs? 😊

"Let's get Dr. Svedik upstairs to the psych ward first," Adam said softly. "He needs some rest, and then we'll have a doctor check him out properly."

"Yeah..."

Susan nodded numbly. Right now, she didn't have any better ideas. Letting him loose outside would be irresponsible—to him and everyone else. The psych ward had rooms designed to keep patients from hurting themselves or others.

"Dr. Svedik...?"

The psych interns, once they heard the story, were just as stunned.

Dr. Svedik was their attending, the big boss, the rock of their department. Who'd have thought he'd end up like this? Their whole goal had been to become a top doc like him, but seeing their idol in this state? Their motivation took a nosedive.

So the rumors around the department were true. This gig was officially a mess! 😊

"Find him a room to rest in first," Adam instructed. "Then call Dr. Jason to come take a look and maybe do some counseling."

"Oh, uh, right!"

The interns snapped out of it. One ran off to phone the other attending psych doc, while another led Adam and the group to a room.

After settling Dr. Svedik in, Adam gave Susan a quick goodbye and headed to the ER. He had a gut feeling tonight was going to be a long one—no sleep in sight.

Sigh. He'd been hoping to head back, jam with Heather, and enjoy her killer drumming. But nope, no chance now. Mood's gone, and saving lives comes first. ☹️

ER.

"Adam, come check this out!"

A woman dressed to the nines in high heels strutted in, clutching her chest dramatically.

"Mrs. Lyon, what's wrong?" Adam asked.

"Call me Piki," she waved a hand dismissively. "I think I'm having a heart attack!"

"Relax," Adam said, his lips twitching into a half-smile. "It's probably not a heart attack."

A real heart attack didn't look like this. He knew Piki well enough—she was extra in every way. Married to a wealthy guy, she lived the high-society life. Lately, her circle of socialites had been obsessed with flaunting "promotions and raises."

Uh-huh. "Promotions" to motherhood, with their rich husbands handing out bonuses for it.

For women like Piki, most became socialites after marrying into money. Prenups were ironclad. They couldn't touch their husbands' main assets—just the agreed-upon allowances: wedding cash, yearly payouts, bonuses for staying married X years, and of course, baby bonuses. Everything had a price tag.

Sure, once they got money of their own, they'd schemed to break free. Consulted lawyers, compared notes with their clique—only to realize the prenups were airtight. So they shelved the "takeover" dreams, pocketed their fixed salaries and bonuses, and lived it up.

When the trend of showing off kids hit the group, Piki jumped on it, "buying" herself a pair of twins.

Yup. Socialites like her were all about looking fabulous—actually having kids themselves? No way.

A while back, that led to a classic scene at the medical center. Inside the delivery room, a woman in labor was groaning in agony. Outside, Piki—who'd gotten word her "order" was ready—rolled up and told her maid to go in and hush the laboring mom. Too noisy, apparently.

After Dr. Montgomery chewed her out, Piki "graciously" left the delivery area and wandered over to the ER to chat with Adam.

Yup! The real elite circle in New York wasn't that big. Adam had met the Lyons before. As the youngest self-made billionaire—handsome, talented, and loaded—he was a hot topic among the socialites. Piki wasn't about to miss her shot.

With her prenup in place, she wasn't scheming anything shady. She wasn't dumb—her life was already peak luxury. Hooking up with Adam would just blow it all up; he'd never marry her anyway. But flirting with a legendary billionaire hottie and snagging some gossip to flex on her fake friends? That was a must. 😊

So she launched into a sob story with Adam—how tough it was to "get" kids, how hard she'd have it as a mom. All while waving her maid over to grab water, unscrew it, and hand it to her. Then sending the maid to check the delivery room: "Are they done yet? Bring them out when they're born—I've got a hair appointment with the girls later!"

When Adam pointed out newborns can't just be paraded around—they need the NICU incubator first—she frowned and dropped the idea. Then, hearing labor might take over ten hours, she sighed dramatically and clicked off in her heels.

Word was, after the twins were born, she called the boy "defective" and refused to hold him. The "perfect" girl? She'd only hold her when the mood struck, passing her off to the maid after a literal second.

Total daily kid time: maybe three hugs, less than a minute combined.

"Not a heart attack?" Piki gasped, slapping her chest theatrically. "Are you sure? I feel like I'm about to die of fright!"

"What's going on?" Adam's curiosity piqued. "Did the Lyons get hit by the Channing scam too?"

"Uh-huh, uh-huh!" Piki nodded furiously.

"How much did you lose?" Adam gave her a pitying look. "Not much, I'm guessing?"

If it were a lot, she wouldn't be this over-the-top—she'd probably have a real heart attack.

"Nothing! We didn't lose a dime," Piki said, clutching her chest and taking a deep breath.

"..."

Adam's mouth twitched.

"But we're terrified after the fact," Piki said, catching his expression and explaining earnestly. "David almost invested, but his business was expanding, so he held off. When I think about how we could've gone bankrupt too, I nearly lose it!

Some of my girls in the circle? Their husbands went bust, got kicked out of their mansions, and now they've got nothing.

Watching them end up so poor they don't even have money left?

We're scared out of our minds!

It's horrifying!" 😱

Chapter 668: Broke Sisters Reunite

Medical Center.

Sure, Piki's a bit over-the-top, but Adam still believed her. He could tell she was genuinely shaken up. And honestly, who wouldn't be? Living in paradise one day, then nearly crashing into hell the next—anyone would be freaked out! 😱

Adam gave Piki a quick checkup to make sure she was okay, then figured he'd pry some fresh intel about the Channing scam from her. Socialites like her always have the juiciest gossip, right?

Sadly, while Piki's "heart attack" was fake, a ton of other people were having real ones. The ER was packed in no time.

"I'm loving this Channing family!" Christina's eyes sparkled as she watched heart attack patients roll in one after another.

"Yeah, sure. Let's see you say that when you're scammed out of everything, your house is seized, and you're drowning in debt," Adam shot back with a smirk.

"That's on them for being greedy and dumb!" Christina shrugged it off. "Who actually believes those ridiculous profit guarantees? Maybe they should check into psych—oh wait, never mind, the head shrink's gone nuts himself!" 😊

"Hold up!"

Chief of Surgery Richard rushed in after getting the news, his face dark as he called everyone to attention. "Listen up! Here's the deal: any doctor or nurse who invested in the Channing Foundation is banned from surgery. Go home and rest. This isn't a suggestion—it's an order!"

He shot a pointed look at Adam, Dr. Burke, Dr. Shepherd, and a few others. Obviously, your average Joe wouldn't have the cash or the connections to sink money into the Channing Foundation—the hot, hush-hush "money tree" the elite crowd had been buzzing about. Only mega-rich folks like Adam or top-tier docs like Burke and Shepherd, pulling in at least two million a year, could even get in on it.

And those guys? They're the backbone of the medical center. If the Channing scam threw them off their game and they botched a surgery, the whole place would be screwed.

Adam and the others glanced around, locked eyes, and chuckled. They were cool as cucumbers.

"No one, huh?" Richard let out a long sigh of relief but still scanned the room to double-check. "We'll investigate later. If anyone broke hospital rules, you're out—no exceptions! So if you did invest, go rest now. Last chance!"

No one budged. "Good!" he nodded. "Then let's get moving!"

Everyone sprang into action.

"Dr. Duncan, we've got a ton of patients tonight. You're flying solo on the scalpel," Richard said, stopping Adam. "You good?"

"Of course," Adam replied with a nod.

"Alright." Richard turned to Christina, who was practically bouncing with excitement. "Dr. Yang, you're leading tonight too. I'll assist."

"Thank you, Chief!" Christina beamed.

"Wait, Chief, you're—?" Adam raised an eyebrow. Something was off. With so many patients flooding in, the Chief—a total pro—was stepping back to assist an inexperienced Christina instead of taking charge?

"Rules are rules. Even I can't break them," Richard grumbled, his face still stormy. "Dr. Yang, what are you waiting for?"

"Oh, right!" Christina bolted toward the OR.

Richard followed, stone-faced. Adam watched him go, half-laughing, half-sighing. Ohhh, so the Chief's a victim too. No wonder he's so salty!

With his status, wealth, and New York address, it wasn't shocking he'd gotten tangled up in the Channing mess—just unexpected yet totally believable.

While Adam and the team busted their butts saving Channing scam victims, over on the other side of town...

A tall blonde girl got the news, cut her graduation trip short, and flew back to her family's fancy New York estate. Outside the mansion, a police car was parked.

Panic flashed in her eyes. For a moment, she couldn't bring herself to get out of the car. What if they were there to arrest her? After all, her name was Caroline Channing.

The Channing name had once brought her endless pride. Now? Nothing but pain. Unless something crazy happened, starting today, "Channing" would be the most hated name in New York.

Then, as she hesitated, two cops escorted a man out of the house.

"I'm not a princess anymore—just a regular person," Caroline thought, stunned.

Anger surged through her next. This man—the one she'd trusted—had betrayed her, shattering her perfect world in an instant. But then she remembered: he was also the one who'd read her bedtime stories, taught her to tie her shoes with goofy little tricks, and patiently showed her how to count money growing up. He'd showered her with love.

Her rich friends? They didn't have her wealth or a dad like that. Their fathers were just... dads. They handed out cash and not much else—no real love. But this man? He wasn't just her father—he was her amazing dad.

Tears welled up, and Caroline couldn't hold back. She jumped out of the car and ran to him, sobbing, "Daddy!"

In that moment, the princess life, the perfect world, the endless glory, the crushing fall from heaven to hell—it didn't matter. All she knew was that this handcuffed man was her incredible dad, the person who loved her more than anyone in the world!

The whole city—heck, the whole world—could curse him and hate him. But not her. Never her.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," Martin Channing said, his voice full of regret and heartache as he looked at his precious daughter. "Don't worry, everything's gonna be okay."

"Mhm, mhm!" Caroline nodded through her tears, blocked from getting closer.

Martin gazed at his daughter—her eyes full of love, not a hint of hate—and smiled as he climbed into the police car.

"William..." Caroline watched the car pull away. She tried to enter the mansion, but it was sealed off. With nowhere else to turn, she called her boyfriend for help.

"Sorry, the number you've dialed is out of service. Please try again later."

William—the guy who'd chased her relentlessly, always so eager and clingy she'd found it annoying—was suddenly unreachable. Sure, U.S. cell service sucked, but this was Manhattan, where you could practically pick up alien signals!

What happened was obvious.

Lugging her suitcase, Caroline had nowhere to go. Her mansion, her credit cards, her \$800 million trust fund—everything was frozen. Swallowing her pride, she headed straight to William's family estate.

But nope. The Channing name was toxic now—everyone avoided it like the plague. William's villa was lit up like a Christmas tree, but the maid told her the whole family "wasn't home."

Caroline left, tears streaming down her face.

Next, she tried her besties. But the rich people's world is brutally real. She hit up five of her closest friends—girls she'd grown up with, her ride-or-die crew—just hoping for a place to crash. Every single one pulled the same "not home" excuse through their maids, just like William.

"Wahhh!"

Legs aching, heart hurting even more, Caroline stumbled out of the fifth friend's neighborhood and broke down crying in a quiet corner. What happened to "sisters for life"?! These were her childhood besties! 😭

A curvy figure passed by, took a few steps, then paused and turned back to look at the sobbing girl. She hesitated, started to walk away again, but stopped when the crying got louder. Clenching her fist and gritting her teeth, she spun around and came back. "Caroline Channing, you okay?"

Caroline wiped her blurry, teary eyes and looked up, uncertain. "Max?"

Chapter 669: A Different Start

Outside the Neighborhood.

"Wow, I'm honored you even remember me," MAX said with a self-deprecating smirk.

"Of course I remember you!"

Caroline wiped her tears, a little embarrassed. "You were the one who... made that sound at my coming-of-age party. And, well, you're kinda hard to forget." She glanced up at MAXAM, who somehow seemed even more intimidating from this angle.

"I was just thinking about that party too," MAX admitted, shrugging. "That's why I almost bailed—I hesitated like crazy. But then I figured, eh, saying hi won't kill me. Adam's impressive, sure, but he's not that magical. And if he is? Well, I'll just lie down and accept my fate."

"Adam?" Caroline blinked, surprised. "You're still dating him?"

"Nah, not really."

MAX couldn't resist a snarky jab. "He's my boss now—I'm basically his secretary. You know how it goes, right?" She winked.

"Oh, I get it," Caroline said, her eyes dimming. "My dad had a secretary too... once upon a time."

"Sorry," MAX said, giving her a pitying look.

"You already know, huh?" Caroline forced a smile. "Makes sense. Back then, everyone knew the Channings. Now? Everyone really knows us."

"Your dad was a legend!" MAX flashed a thumbs-up. "Scamming so many people, raking in all that cash—total baller move!" Then she tilted her head, curious. "You really had no clue?"

"My dad never told me anything," Caroline said with a bitter laugh. "He just said business was booming these past few years."

"Oh, it was booming alright," MAX nodded. "All those suckers chasing his 'high returns,' while he had his eye on their principal. People in New York were lining up to hand him money—you practically needed VIP status or a backdoor deal just to get in. How could business not be good?"

Caroline hung her head in shame. What used to be her biggest pride was now her deepest wound. She didn't blame her dad, though. Raised under his meticulous guidance, she knew this kind of thing was a solo secret—not something you'd spill to your daughter, or even mutter in your sleep.

"So, what's your plan now?" MAX asked, glancing at her.

"I don't know," Caroline said, her voice breaking. "I've got nowhere to go. My boyfriend, my so-called besties—none of them are picking up. They're all 'out.' I can't handle more humiliation... I think I need a job. Hey, where's a place Upper East Siders would never set foot in?"

"Brooklyn," MAX replied without missing a beat. "But if someone like you goes there, good luck getting out. Maybe 30% chance you're carried out, 70% chance you just vanish."

"It's not that bad, is it?" Caroline's eyes widened. "I know it's rough, but it's still New York. Don't the cops do anything?"

"Cops need to actually be there first," MAX said, reaching out a hand. "You're a princess who's read a few books and knows the world's got a dark side, but you've got no idea what real darkness is. Come on, get up. If you've got nowhere else, crash at my place tonight. Figure out tomorrow when it comes."

"Really? I can?"

Caroline looked at MAX in shock and gratitude. She never imagined that in her lowest moment, someone she'd once looked down on—a stranger—would offer her a lifeline.

"Only if you don't try to be my 'sister,'" MAX shrugged. "You'll figure out why eventually."

"It's been four years, and you still remember that?"

Caroline took MAX's hand, letting herself be pulled up. She brushed back her flowing blonde hair and gave a wry smile. "Don't worry, no one's lining up to be near me now. The richer they are, the less they want me. Adam's the youngest billionaire out there—he can have anything. No way he'd risk pissing off a crowd just for me."

"Whoa," MAX said, genuinely impressed. "You don't just remember—you've actually thought this through. Girl, I thought I was wild, but compared to you? I'm nothing!"

"No, no!" Caroline waved her hands frantically. "I'm not trying to steal Adam from you or anything..."

"Chill!" MAX laughed, cutting her off. "What's he to me? It's been four years—you think a guy like him is still hung up on someone like me?"

"You're great. You're worth him sticking around for," Caroline said sincerely.

"Quit the flattery," MAX grinned, waving it off. "I said you can come, so I won't back out. Let's go—my car's over there."

"That's your car?"

Caroline gaped at MAX's beat-up ride, stunned.

"Yup, that's my baby," MAX said, tossing Caroline's luggage in the trunk with a self-mocking grin. "Pretty pathetic for a secretary, huh?"

"No, it's not... Is Adam really that stingy?"

Caroline tried to be polite but couldn't hold back.

"What do you think?"

MAX finished loading the bags and motioned for Caroline to hop in. As she started the car, she smirked, "He's not just stingy—he's petty as hell. Cross him even a little, and he'll make your life miserable. You can scream for mercy all you want; he won't care..."

"..."

Caroline started to take it seriously, but by the end, she just rolled her eyes. As a Channing heiress, she wasn't that naive—she knew a tease when she heard one.

"Alright, kidding aside," MAX said, glancing at her with a chuckle. "I call him my 'sugar daddy' sometimes, but I can work for myself. Why take his money? And the car? It's just to get around—why splurge on a fancy one?"

"But aren't you his secretary?" Caroline asked, confused.

"I've played the part," MAX shrugged.

"Now I'm lost," Caroline said, frowning. "What do you actually do? And if you don't take his money, how are you even here?"

Her fifth "bestie"—the one who'd always been the quiet, "poor" one in their group—was still loaded by normal standards. Her family was filthy rich, living in a neighborhood packed with millionaires. In the U.S., the wealthy love jacking up local prices to squeeze out the broke folks, then cluster together. Cops follow, patrolling 24/7 to keep out the riffraff and pamper the elites with top-tier safety.

With MAX's apparent budget, she shouldn't be able to stroll into a place like this without Adam's clout.

"Adam started a book-making company," MAX explained with a grin. "He does the outlines, I flesh out the details and draw the art. When I'm stuck on a plot, I call him over to brainstorm. Or, you know, when I'm stuck on other things that need sorting out. Guy's a beast—endless energy.

So yeah, kinda like a secretary, right?

As for why I'm here, a kid's having a birthday nearby. She's obsessed with our Peppa Pig comics. You know how it is with these rich kids' birthdays—totally different from ours. They get whatever they want. Her mom rang me up, and boom, I'm here singing and spilling unpublished comic stories for her."

"I get it," Caroline said wistfully. "When I was a kid, my dad got Macaulay Culkin for my birthday. (Timeline's shifted—any differences from the original are thanks to Adam's meddling.) Shame he had to go back eventually."

"Your family got the Home Alone kid as a birthday gift?" MAX's jaw dropped. "Your folks were drowning in cash! No wonder Melissa was so jealous of you—and no wonder she's loving this now."

"You know Melissa?" Caroline froze. "Wait, the birthday girl's her little sister?"

That fifth bestie—the one who'd crushed her last shred of hope.

"Yup," MAX said, giving her a sympathetic look. "That's how I heard about you so fast. Even if her mom paid me extra, I only gave my real blessings to my little fan—not the whole family."

"Should've fake-blessed them," Caroline muttered, slapping her thigh in regret. "Could've squeezed out a few more bucks!"

"..."

MAX stared, speechless. "Congrats, you're definitely not adopted!"

Chapter 670: Max: "I'll Take Care of You!"

Inside an apartment.

"Come on in! It's a little small and kinda messy," Max said, unlocking the door and waving Caroline inside.

"It's pretty nice..."

The lights flicked on, and Caroline glanced around, giving a polite response. Sure, "small" didn't even begin to compare to her family's sprawling estate—it felt tinier than her old walk-in closet. And "messy"? Random sketch papers were strewn everywhere, clearly no maid on duty 24/7.

But as a Wharton Business School grad now reeling from that paradise-to-hell freefall, she wasn't exactly in the mood to flex her usual casual Versailles vibes.

"How much is the rent here?"

Her dad had drilled number-crunching into her since she was a kid, and now that he'd been hauled off, that instinct kicked into overdrive.

"Rent?" Max shook her head. "Honestly, I have no clue."

"You don't know?" Caroline blinked, then it clicked. "Oh, did Adam rent it for you?"

"Nope." Max tossed her stuff aside and flopped onto the couch. "I just bought it, so I wouldn't know what the rent's like."

"You bought it?"

Caroline sized up the place—two bedrooms, one living room. She'd noticed the neighborhood was decent coming in, and the location wasn't bad either. A spot like this had to cost at least a few hundred grand!

"Yup!" Max saw Caroline still standing there awkwardly and got up. "Sit down already! Want something to drink?"

"Just water's fine." Caroline had been running around all night and was parched. Still, she couldn't help adding, "If you've got that kind of cash, why buy a place? Renting's cheaper, and you could invest the rest for way better returns!"

"I don't get investing." Max grabbed two water bottles from the fridge and handed one over. "You've gotta have your own place to live, right? Besides, it wasn't that much money."

"..."

Caroline felt a weird mix of déjà vu and total disconnect. To her—penniless now, maybe even jobless—hundreds of thousands, once pocket change for a single party, was suddenly an unreachable dream.

"Drawing pays that well?" she asked, incredulous.

She might not know the nitty-gritty of "commoner" prices, but she had a rough idea. Wharton taught her how to squeeze every dime out of workers to rake in profits—gotta know what the help's worth, or you'll overpay and get blacklisted by the capitalist clique!

"It's alright." Max shrugged. "Peppa Pig sells like crazy, and Adam gave me some fat bonuses. I don't know squat about investing, though—money just sits in the bank losing value. Figured a house was a safer bet."

Hmm.

Adam didn't drag Max into investments like he did with Juno or Heather. Why? Simple. Like any ruthless boss, he wasn't about to let Max—tied to him and Peppa Pig's massive profits—get so rich she could just kick back and quit. He hated that lazy, salty-fish side of her! 😊

That said, he didn't screw her over either. She'd spent four years in school—two at community college, where Adam's encouragement pushed her to shine, then two more at an art university. In the U.S., those later community college credits stack toward a proper degree, so after two years at art school, she snagged her bachelor's.

During those years, she worked part-time, studying while sketching Peppa Pig. After graduation, it hit the shelves, and Adam hooked her up with enough bonus cash to casually land a house, a beat-up car, and a comfy stack of bills.

But aside from the house and that junker car, Max's biggest splurges? Buying stuff for Adam. Thousands, tens of thousands—she tossed money around like it was nothing. Adam nagged her about it constantly, teasing that she'd gotten too used to shelling out for him, like some "uncomfy without spoiling" pro.

Every time, she'd yank him into a bear hug and crow, "A sugar baby who doesn't pamper her sugar daddy isn't a good sugar baby! Just think of it as early retirement—I'll take care of you!" 🥰

So, Adam stopped handing her bonuses after that. Instead, he stashed the cash for her, planning to drop it all later—otherwise, she'd just blow it all on him.

"Such a waste," Caroline muttered, her brain spinning.

She wasn't scheming or anything—her upbringing just made her allergic to the idea of snagging your first big paycheck and not turning it into more money. That was poor people logic!

"This couch?" Caroline sat down and immediately felt it wobble. "Why don't you replace it?"

"I've swapped it out a bunch of times," Max shrugged. "But every time Adam shows up, it breaks. Eventually, I just gave up."

"..."

Caroline froze, unsure what to say—or if she should even keep sitting there!

By then, Max had flipped on the TV. Naturally, Martin Channing's bombshell scandal was plastered across every channel. She flipped through a few—same story everywhere.

"No point switching," Caroline said, forcing herself to toughen up. "I expected this. I wanna see what people are saying."

"You sure?" Max raised an eyebrow, trying to be nice. "Your dad's stirred up a total shitstorm. No one's gonna have anything good to say."

"It's fine," Caroline straightened up, eyes locked on the screen. "I can handle it."

A few minutes later...

"Turn it off! Turn it off!"

Caroline couldn't take it anymore. The wild, creative insults people were hurling at her dad on TV blew past anything she could've imagined. You can curse someone out like THAT?! 🤔

"Told ya," Max shrugged, eyeing her. "You really don't know jack about life down here, huh? This is barely the tip of the iceberg."

"This is what 'bottom-tier' life is like?" Caroline panicked.

"This ain't even one percent of it," Max said, giving the former princess a pitying look. "Let me put it this way: right now, you're like a maid stuck alone at Schwarzenegger's place after dark."

"Huh?" Caroline was lost.

"You're about to get wrecked by the real world," Max said with a goofy grin.

"..."

Caroline just blinked, thrown off by Max's crude slang. What even is that saying? So tacky!

"Alright, you've had a hell of a day. Go wash up and crash," Max said, seeing Caroline wasn't in the mood for her hard-earned street lingo. "Guest room's over there—you're staying here. Whatever's going on, we'll figure it out tomorrow.

"Don't sweat it. People adapt like champs. Life's like, uh... you know. Can't fight it? Lie back and enjoy the ride. You'll find the fun in the suck soon enough. That's just how it goes! Trust me—I'm a pro at this!" 😊

"Thanks, Max," Caroline said, half-laughing, half-crying. She was genuinely grateful for the shelter and comfort.

No comparison, no pain. Her so-called boyfriend and besties couldn't hold a candle to a near-stranger's kindness. If this was bottom-tier life, maybe she could deal... for a while.

Yup! Deep down, she still had some confidence. She was young, a Wharton grad, and had inherited her dad's business smarts. Once she got through this rough patch, she'd bounce back.

Caroline Channing, you've got this!

With that thought, she smiled, washed up, and hit the hay.